

SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS:

OR,

A PRACTICAL IMPROVEMENT

THE

PRINCIPAL HISTORIES

IN THE

OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

VOL. IV.

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THE SECOND EDITION.

*God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers
by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.*

Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed.

Heb. i. 1, 2. ii. 1.

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SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS;

VOLUME THE FOURTH,

CONTAINING

THE SECOND PART

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OF THE

PRINCIPAL HISTORIES

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IN THE

NEW TESTAMENT.

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SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 33.

Jesus delivered the parable of the marriage feast—replied to the Pharisees and Herodians, on the payment of tribute—confounded the Sadducees, by proving the resurrection—answered a Scribe, respecting the first and great commandment—baffled the Pharisees, by proposing a question about the Messiah—warned his disciples against the Scribes and Pharisees, whom he reproved and condemned in the most awful language.

“ **W**_H**E**_R**E** is the wife? where is the Scribe? where is the disputer of this world *?” Such were the opponents of our Lord; and in their proud and malicious contentions with him they were completely vanquished and confounded. Towards the close of his life, especially, they assailed him with all their subtlety, in order to ensnare him; but their best-concerted plans were

1 Cor. i. 20.

VOL. IV.

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baffled.

baffled. We know alfo, that all his adverfaries, who object to his Gofpel, though they may be thought to poffefs an uncommon degree of fagacity and learning, fhall finally be convicted of the groffeft folly, be f silenced and overcome. • “ All that are incenfed againft him fhall be afhamed *.”

Turfday in
Paflion week.

Part of his audience had withdrawn, being enraged by his faithful admonitions; but he proceeded to inftitute the reft by a very interefting parable †. In language fomething fimilar to what he had ufed on a former occafion ‡, he reprefented the great blessings of the Gofpel under the defcription of a feaft. Plenteous provifions, and fuch as are moft exquisite in their nature, are here exhibited. They are fufficient for the fupply of every gueft, and capable of yielding inexpressible delight. This is more than a common entertainment: it is a royal banquet; what the King of heaven has prepared for the accommodation of his creatures upon earth. It is, alfo, defigned for the celebration of a marriage, the union of his own Son with the Church: for Jefus is the Bridegroom of his people, having espoufed them to himfelf. What extenfive and unparalleled grace does this difplay!

A numerous company had been defired to give their attendance; but at the proper feafon, when reminded of their fovereign's expectations, they refufed to obey his fummons. Yet fuch was his condefcenfion, that after this infult he renewed the invitation, and fent one meffage upon another, affuring them

* Ifa. xlv. 24. † Matt. xxii. 1—14. ‡ Sect. 26.

that his table was richly furnished for their reception, and requesting their presence without delay. Even then his kindness was rejected with disdain, being considered as a matter not worth regarding: for "they made light of it," and turned their attention to their common occupations.* Is this a natural description? Are men, in general, backward to partake of a sumptuous entertainment? Do they shun the opportunity of gratifying their sensual appetites? No: but the feast, here exhibited, is spiritual: and the contempt, with which its blessings are usually refused, is a decisive proof of our extreme depravity: there is scarcely any thing in life, which is not preferred to grace and salvation.

The parable further declares that the servants, who carried their lord's messages, were treated with scorn and violence; and that some of them suffered death. This was, exactly, what the holy prophets and Apostles met with from the Jewish nation. Jesus, therefore, held up to his hearers a true picture of the persecuting spirit, by which both they and their fathers were distinguished. And, while he represented the king as utterly destroying his murderous subjects, and reducing their city to ashes, he virtually predicted the divine judgments coming upon them, for their rejection of the Gospel. Their fall, however, has contributed to the exaltation of others: we "have obtained mercy through their unbelief*."

The invitation to the marriage was enlarged. The sovereign, determined that his preparations should not

* Rom. xi. 30.

be ineffectual, called in the strangers and miserable outcasts upon the highways, till the feast was furnished with guests. Thus the Lord God has sent the glad tidings of salvation to sinners of the Gentiles, even to those, who through their ignorance and profaneness seem at the greatest distance, and in a state the most deplorably wretched. The ministers of the Gospel are now commissioned to "bid to the marriage, as many as they shall find." Whatever, then, may have been your character or condition, we entreat your attendance, and assure you, that the Lord will graciously receive you. O refuse not, as others have done to their perdition!

But if you accept the invitation, you must comply with the rules prescribed, and be properly habited, while you sit down to this entertainment: for "a wedding garment" is provided for the guests. God himself proposes to "cover you with the robe of righteousness," which will render you beautiful in his sight: you cannot, indeed, stand in his presence without it. He will minutely survey the persons, who profess a readiness to partake of his feast. Let all the outward members of his Church attentively consider that scrutiny, which He makes. One is represented as singled out from the rest, being destitute of the vestment required on the occasion, and commanded by the Lord of the assembly. He was called forth and examined concerning his pretensions to be admitted to that high banquet, and, having nothing to urge in his own defence, was cast out with extreme disgrace. The all-piercing eye of God will detect every hypocrite, who may be numbered
among

among his people. It is not enough to join the assemblies of the saints: have we “put on Christ?” If we are unwilling to appear in his righteousness, and presume upon our own worthiness, we cannot be acceptable guests: nor can we escape conviction. “How camest thou in hither?” is a question, which will confound thousands, who seemed to pay a respect to the Gospel. What, then, is our habit? Are we “clothed with the garment of salvation?” If otherwise, an awful condemnation awaits us: we must be excluded from God and happiness, and consigned to a place of endless and inexpressible torment, anguish, and despair. Ah! what “searchings of heart” become us, since few, in comparison, obtain the efficacious influence of that grace, which is tendered to them in the Gospel!

These solemn admonitions of Jesus did not conciliate, but rather the more exasperate, his enemies. Yet they were afraid to take away his life by force, and, therefore, by various schemes endeavoured to find some plausible pretext for doing it. Accordingly, they proposed subtle questions, merely that they might draw from him such answers, as would furnish them with a heavy charge against him. The Pharisees left him, and, having consulted together on the best method of effecting their design, joined the Herodians, in laying a snare for him*. These men were of different parties and principles, and yet they could agree in the same diabolical purpose. They came with fair, but feigned, professions of re-

* Matt. xxii. 15—22. Mark xii. 13—17. Luke xx. 20—26.

gard, and requested our Lord's decision, as to the lawfulness of paying tribute to Cesar, the Roman Emperor. Probably, they were confident of involving him in a very serious difficulty: if he had dissuaded them from submitting to the tax, they might have accused him as an enemy to the government; or, if he had commanded it, they might have incensed the people against him, as hostile to their liberties.

But how vain are all human devices, in opposition to God! Jesus perceived their malevolent intentions, and sharply reproved their hypocrisy. He replied with peculiar wisdom, so as to make them judge and condemn themselves in their own cause. They were forced to confess their subjection to Cesar, so long as they received the current coin, which was stamped with that Emperor's image. He inferred therefore, without entering into political debates, that they should "render to Cesar the things which were Cesar's." A conclusion undeniably just: and equally just was the caution, which he subjoined, that God also has demands upon us, which ought, at least, to be as much regarded and complied with, as those of our earthly governors. They were astonished at the prudence and propriety of this answer, and obliged for that time to abandon their purpose.

Let us, then, attend to our Lord's decision, and seriously consider what we owe both to God and the king. These duties are not incompatible with each other: we cannot plead, that we truly "fear God," if we do not "honour the king." Are we giving him

him that reverence and support, which are due to his station and authority? Do we utter contemptuous speeches against the magistrate? Do we listen with pleasure to the debates of sedition? Do we study fraudulent methods of evading the taxes, which are imposed, or pay them with a peevish discontent? Surely, such a conduct is as repugnant as disgraceful to the profession of religion. But, though we have maintained our loyalty and submission to the reigning powers, have we not neglected the God of heaven? Has He no rights, no claims upon us? Or, shall we presume, that he will not assert them? "Will a man rob God?" Would not the attempt imply consummate ignorance, pride, and fool-hardiness? Yet we all have done it. We have not admired his perfections, honoured his government, obeyed his law, or believed in his Gospel, as we ought. We have not rendered all proper reverence and attention to his name, his sabbaths, his house, or ministers. "Enter not into judgment with thy servants, O Lord!" •

On the same day, a different set of men attacked the Saviour *. The Sadducees, who denied a future state, came and started a difficulty against the resurrection of the body, which they ridiculed. They urged, that seven brethren, having been married in succession to the same woman, could not all claim her as their wife in the world to come. But Jesus declared, that their opinions evinced an ignorance of the scriptures, and of the mighty power of God; since that power can easily restore life to the dead, however improbable

* Matt. xxii. 23—33. Mark xii. 18—27. Luke xx. 27—4c.

the event may seem, and the scriptures expressly assert, that they shall rise. He argued, that all the distinctions and relations, which subsist among us on earth, will have no place hereafter. There may be a knowledge of those, to whom we are now closely united; but all those partial attachments and connections, which bind us to one another, will then be done away, as inconsistent with the perfection of the heavenly state. Their objection, therefore, fell to the ground. He shewed also, even from the books of Moses, which they professed to receive, that Jehovah had evidently given intimations of a future state, by calling himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, long after those patriarchs were deceased: we may thence conclude, that departed saints are not perished: but that, as God is their God, their spirits are now with him, and their dust shall awake again, to live in his presence for ever. Thus they were completely vanquished, and dared not to renew their attack.

Do not modern free-thinkers, like the ancient Sadducees, betray their ignorance and perverseness by the difficulties which they start on the subject of religion? We would, therefore, address them in the words of Jesus, "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God." We entreat you to relinquish your speculations, which will certainly turn to your confusion. To be possessed of a captious disposition and a fondness for dispute, is accounted, in the estimate of reason, no mark of wisdom or humility. It is easy to propose, what the most intelligent cannot

cannot resolve, and to perplex, what human ingenuity cannot unravel. Such cavilling may furnish amusement to your fancy, and adulation to your pride. But, while you refuse to hear the simple declarations of God's word, and oppose to them your own arrogant decisions, you exalt yourselves above your Maker, and (such will ever be the doom of the proud deceiver) you will perish in your vain imaginations.

But, though the Sadducees declined the contest with Jesus, the Pharisees still renewed it, as if they were confident of succeeding better*. One of their learned doctors came forward with a question, intending to try his knowledge of divine revelation. It seems to have been disputed among them, which was the most important and necessary precept: some preferred ceremonies, and others sacrifices, while the generality paid little regard to that extensive holiness, which is indispensably required. Upon this point, therefore, the Scribe appealed to Jesus, and obtained a decisive answer. The Saviour discovered at once a complete understanding of the sacred law in its full import, while he declared, that its grand demand is love; love the most ardent, of which we are capable, to the one supreme Jehovah, and love for the whole human species, as sincere as that which we feel for ourselves. The Jewish doctor perceived and acknowledged the excellence of this reply, and joined in asserting, that the principle of obedience, which our Lord laid down, was far more valuable and acceptable to God, than all ceremonial observances or expensive sacrifices. It ap-

* Matt. xxii. 3; &c. Mark xii. 28—37. Luke xx. 41—44.

peared, then, that the Scribe, though he had come with an improper temper, possessed more consistent sentiments of divine truth, than were usually found among the Pharisees, and such as tended to lead him to an unfeigned acceptance of the Gospel. On this ground, Jesus commended the solidity of his judgment, and considered him as promising fair for the kingdom of God. What the event was, we are not told. .

The subject, here proposed, is highly interesting: have we attended to it? Do we understand, what is of main importance in religion? Are we aware of the extensive and spiritual nature of God's moral law? Do we approve and admire its precepts, as "holy, and just, and good?" Do we live under the influence of that sacred principle of love, which is required in preference to every thing besides, and without which nothing can be pleasing to God? It is, indeed, the sum and substance of all those duties, which the inspired writers have inculcated, and is properly called "the fulfilling of the law*." Every transgression shews a defect of this disposition; for, if it maintained an entire and constant ascendancy, it would certainly lead to the full perfection of obedience. But our failure is continual, and of lamentable obliquity. Our desires and affections, if examined by this test, will every day convict us of guilt. We come far short of that regard, which we owe both to God and man; and nothing which we can possibly plead, will compensate the want of it.

* Rom. xiii. 10.

The Pharisees still surrounded our Lord, and probably meditated a fresh attack. But he, the more completely to baffle and confound them, proposed a question, and called upon them to declare their opinion of the extraction of Messiah, whom they professed to look for. He started a difficulty from their own scriptures, which they could not resolve. They were agreed, that the Christ, the promised Saviour, must be "the Son of David;" and they could not deny, that David, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, speaks of him as his Lord *. When urged, therefore, to explain, in what sense he could be the Son, and yet the Lord, of David, they could not reply. They felt themselves overpowered, and relinquished their vain disputations, though they still retained all their malevolence.

To us, also, the inquiry may be addressed, and an important one it is, "What think ye of Christ?" Have you formed consistent and scriptural sentiments of his person and descent? Or, how do you remove the difficulty, as it is here stated? If it be admitted, that Christ is very God, as well as very man, the seeming absurdity and contradiction is done away. In his human nature, he is "the Son of David, according to the flesh;" but, by a divine nature only, he is "David's Lord." Thus he styles himself "The root and the offspring of David †." But if we represent him as no more than a creature like ourselves, and as having no higher original than earthly parents, the whole is strange and incongruous. The question

* Psalm cv. 1.

† Rev. xxii. 16.

will still recur, and cannot be answered, "How doth David in Spirit call him Lord?" If we abide by the plain and express declarations of the Bible, we shall readily allow, that Jesus is "Immanuel," "God manifested in the flesh:" no other doctrine will reconcile the various passages, which relate to him. And this important position being established, we may rejoice and triumph, as it lays a secure and immovable foundation for our hope towards God.

Jesus continued through the day to teach, admonish, and reprove. Addressing himself to his disciples, in the audience of all the people, he solemnly warned them to beware of the pride and hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees, whom he severely condemned. The sentence and the language were similar to those on a former occasion, of awful and impressive import*: "As far as they speak to you in God's name, and agreeably to his word, they demand your respect and obedience. But their conduct is inconsistent with their own instructions: be therefore afraid of being misled by their pernicious examples. They assume an appearance of great sanctity, and scrupulously practise many religious ceremonies; but they act, throughout, from the basest principles; their only aim is to gain the notice and applause of men. Their ostentation and vain-glory are detestable, while they affect such distinctions and titles, as lead the people to compliment their piety and learning. But you, my disciples, must be far different, not taking to yourselves

* Matt. xxiii. 1, &c. Mark xii. 38—40. Luke xx. 45, &c. See Sect. 24.

any state, or courting appellations of honour and precedence. You must live as brethren, who have but one Father and one Master, and be willing to submit to the meanest office, exhibiting a pattern of lowliness and self-abasement. Such a temper is indispensably requisite, since God will confound the man, who shall dare to exalt himself; and He will favour none but the humble."

Have we, then, attended to the exhortation, which equally concerns all the followers of Jesus? Do we possess that meekness of spirit, so essential to the Christian character? Are there no proud contentions among us for superiority of rank? And do we cheerfully condescend and stoop to our inferiors, for their benefit? Or again, while we pay a due respect to those in higher life, do we reverence God and our conscience above all? Do we remember, as we ought, that we are accountable, not to men, but to God, who "searcheth the heart," and that "one is our Master, even Christ?"

When Jesus had delivered these cautions, he turned himself to the Scribes and Pharisees, who still, probably, expected to find some ground of accusation against him. He then addressed them with peculiar majesty, and as one invested with sovereign authority. In the capacity of their Judge, he arraigned, he convicted them, and, for their secret iniquity, pronounced upon them the heaviest condemnation. From one sentence to another, each containing a discovery of their wickedness and a memorial of their folly, we hear, in awful and prophetic repetition, the word of warning and
tremendous

tremendous denunciation, breaking forth from his lips. Yet who shall blame the intimations of judgment? Who shall wonder, that the cry was “Wo unto you, Scribes and Pharisees?” Let us read the long, black roll of their offences: let us mark the charges, brought by their unprejudiced accuser.

They discovered an obstinate and malevolent opposition to the Gospel, not only rejecting it themselves, but, with a furious bigotry, preventing others from receiving it. They practised the most cruel oppressions, even upon the widow and the fatherless, and yet covered their injustice with a shew of uncommon ardour in devotion. Their pretences to religion rendered their extortion the more detestable; and therefore Jesus declared, that their boasted prayers would aggravate their damnation. They shewed great zeal to gain proselytes, not for the glory of God, but their own reputation; and they were so earnest to confirm each convert in error and hatred of the truth, as to make his case more deplorable and hopeless than that of his seducer. They endeavoured by specious arguments and curious distinctions to justify their profane use of oaths, as if they might be allowed to swear in certain forms of speech, and contracted not any high degree of guilt by falsifying their solemn affirmations. But Jesus convicted them of horrid impiety and perjury, while he asserted, that such appeals to the temple, and the altar, as they pleaded for, were no other than appeals to God himself.

They paid a scrupulous attention to some trifles, which exalted their reputation, but neglected the
most

most important and necessary duties. Their religious zeal was confined to external observances: they sought not real purity of heart. They were satisfied with so much of the appearance of sanctity, as would procure them admiration among the people, while their vile affections exposed them to the contempt and indignation of that righteous God, to whom all their secret iniquity lay open.

They pretended a high veneration for those holy men, whom their fathers had murdered. But, though they professed to honour deceased saints by building and adorning their sepulchres, they persecuted the living, and thus proved that they inherited the same violent hatred of genuine piety, as their ancestors. Jesus, therefore, declared, that by their continued progress in wickedness, they would soon fill up their measure, and be ripe for destruction. So obdurate were they, that he considered them as on the brink of final perdition, ready to sink down into "the damnation of hell." Yet further means were to be tried with them. Apostles and other ministers were to be sent among them, to bear witness of the truth: but our Lord predicted, that, by their cruel and sanguinary opposition to those his honoured servants, they would provoke God more and more, till at length he should arise to take exemplary vengeance upon that very generation, and reckon with them for all the righteous blood, which had been shed from the beginning of the world.

How deplorable was their case! Jesus, being deeply affected at the prospect of their approaching miseries, broke forth into a pathetic lamentation. They were
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the same accents of pity, by which he had twice before expressed the yearnings of his bowels*. From this part of his conduct it appears, that, though he pronounced the most tremendous woes, judgment is “his strange work.” He bewailed the murderous city, which had long been the seat of persecution, and which had scornfully resisted all his efforts of love for the salvation of her children. He would have cherished and protected them, as a hen her tender brood; but they had obstinately rejected his gracious proposals. At last, therefore, insulted mercy was about to be withdrawn and give place to unrelenting justice: and that hand, which had been long stretched out with offers of richest blessings, was soon to be lifted up with a rod of indignation to desolate their country, and destroy them for ever. Thus Jesus took a solemn farewell of the temple, to return no more: he warned the impenitent sinners around him, and predicted, that at his future advent they would acknowledge his divine character, and be glad to join in those acclamations of praise, which had lately been forbidden in that house, saying, “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”

What solemn things are these! Surely, if they are seriously regarded, they must leave a deep impression upon our minds. Let us, then, make the application to ourselves, rather than to the ancient Pharisees.

1. A striking exhibition is here given of the character of Jesus. Behold, how tender his compassion, how extensive his grace! He seeks after those, who

* Sect. 25. and 31.

are ready to perish, and, with repeated and importunate solicitations, entreats them to hide themselves “under the shadow of his wings,” where alone they can be safe and happy. O why are we unwilling to accept his offers? Let us also remark, how strict are his proceedings, when “he lays judgment to the line.” How terrible the effects of his anger! Who, then, shall presume to contend with Him? If we refuse to honour him by our unfeigned compliance, he will glorify himself in our everlasting destruction.

2. Let not the faithful ministers of Christ be reproached, for endeavouring, like their Lord and Master, to admonish and reprove their careless hearers. In performing that painful part of their office, they do not assume the authority of a judge: but if, as the mouth of God, they should declare his whole will without reserve, they must denounce vengeance, as well as proclaim mercy. From the example of Jesus, we see that this is consistent with the exercise of perfect compassion and meekness. And shall you charge with uncharitableness and pride those, who “watch for your souls,” because they think themselves bound to address the wicked, even in the very strong language of the Saviour, “How can ye escape the damnation of hell?”

3. Let us seriously examine our own character. What is our state? What our expectation? Do we not, in some respect or other, betray a temper or conduct, similar to that of the Pharisees? Much we have heard of their hypocrisy: let us fear to put on, as they did, a profession of piety “for a cloke of maliciousness;”

liciousness;" this would be more detestable, than avowed infidelity. Yet let not pure religion be laid aside, because we abhor the vile dissimulation of those, who have nothing* but a fair appearance. Some are vehement in their invectives against the men, who "for a pretence make long prayers," while they themselves never pray at all. These persons may not come under the condemnation of Pharisees, but they shall not escape the judgment of God for their impiety. And, if they perish for ever, it will be no comfort to them, that others are suffering a still greater degree of torment.

O let us welcome the Saviour, while we adopt that expressive acclamation, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord;" that "when he shall appear," the second time, "we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming*!" Amen.

* 1 John ii. 28.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 34.

Jesus commended the liberality of a poor widow—predicted the destruction of the city and temple of Jerusalem, and the various signs and circumstances attending it—foretold, also, his coming to judgment, and exhorted to watchfulness.

JESUS, having pronounced a tremendous sentence upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and declared that “their house was left unto them desolate,” withdrew from that beautiful edifice, in which they gloried as their brightest ornament and surest defence. He departed from the temple to return no more.

Yet, before he went out, he paused, and remarked the readiness with which the various worshippers cast their money into the treasury, for the necessary expenses of the divine service*. Many opulent persons contributed much; but he fixed his eyes upon a poor widow, while she was throwing in her two mites, and pointed her out to his disciples as an object of his peculiar regard. He knew her straitened circumstances; he saw and approved the inward principle of her heart. The value of her oblation was trifling, but it included the whole of her little property. Our Lord, therefore,

* MARK xii. 41, &c. LUKE xxi. 1—4.

represented her liberality as more enlarged and more acceptable to God, than the costly offerings of the wealthy, who had given up only a small part of their superfluity, and still retained every enjoyment as before. We learn from this short narration, that it is incumbent upon all to communicate, according to their ability, for the advancement of religion, as well as for the relief of the afflicted; that such as are indigent are not excused from the duty; and that He, "by whom actions are weighed," will commend and recompense the least donations which spring from faith and love.

Jesus was leaving the temple, when his disciples took the opportunity of remarking to him the extent and magnificence of the building, supposing, probably, that he would express his admiration*. But he turned off their attention from the consideration of its grandeur to that of its approaching demolition, when not one stone should remain upon another. He then retired to the mount of Olives, which afforded him a prospect of the sacred edifice; and while he sat there, perhaps contemplating the destruction which he had foretold, some of his Apostles enquired privately, how soon his prophecies would be fulfilled, and what particular signals would precede the great events. His reply to the question contains various circumstantial predictions, which, when compared with their exact accomplishment, furnish the strongest evidence in support of the Gospel, and stand as an impregnable barrier against the assaults of infidelity. He addressed his disciples to the following purpose:

* Matt. xxiv. 1, &c. Mark xiii. 1, &c. Luke xxi. 5, &c.

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“ It is necessary for you to be upon your guard against vain pretenders; for many impostors shall arise, assuming the name and character of the Messiah, and affecting to set up his kingdom. Dreadful commotions and distresses, also, shall be permitted, before the appointed desolation of the Jews; but you ought not, on that account, to be terrified or surprised. You will hear of the alarms of war, seditions, famines, pestilences, and earthquakes; and tremendous appearances shall be seen in the air: yet, awful as these may be, they are intended only as presages of far severer calamities.”

“ You, my beloved friends, will stand in need of a peculiar degree of courage. For, previous to those national judgments, the most violent persecutions shall be raised against you; so that you may expect, in my service, universal hatred, stripes, imprisonment, and death itself. Hereby, indeed, an honour will be conferred upon you. While you are called to answer for yourselves, you will have the opportunity of bearing witness to the truth before kings and rulers of the earth, and evincing the excellence of your principles. You may tremble, perhaps, under an apprehension, that, because you are destitute of learning and eloquence, you shall not be able to vindicate my Gospel, as you ought, and may therefore be confounded in the presence of your judges. But you need not be anxious on this account, since the Holy Ghost will support you, and furnish you with proper arguments and words: and I pledge myself to give you such utterance and wisdom, as shall render you superior to all the subtlety and power of your enemies.”

“ This fierce opposition to my cause will stagger many of its professed friends, and induce them to desert it. Through the fear of persecution, they will apostatise from the truth, and betray their nearest relations, who stedfastly maintain it; so that one brother shall treacherously deliver up another to the hand of violence, the father his son, the children their parents. What, then, have you to look for, but general contempt and abhorrence? Yet a peculiar protection, extending even to your minutest concerns, shall be afforded you; in dependence upon which, you may possess an unshaken firmness and composure of mind.”

“ Many false teachers, also, shall arise, and spread destructive errors: and, through the prevalence of iniquity, not a few of those, who have shewn much love for my name, shall decline from their spirituality and zeal. In the midst of such difficulties, you may be perplexed and ready to abandon my service: but I exhort you to persevere through all extremities, having respect to the glorious recompense of reward, which is set before you. For your encouragement, I assure you that your word shall not be ineffectual, and that by your means, weak as you are, the Gospel of my grace shall be promulgated from kingdom to kingdom, and make its way against all opposition, to every nation of the known world. After that event the end shall come; the Jewish state shall be concluded, the city and temple laid in ruins, and both the civil and ecclesiastical polity totally destroyed.”

“ There are, likewise, nearer signs, and certain attendant circumstances of this approaching devastation,
which

which you will carefully remark. According to Daniel's prophecy*, you will see the Roman armies (properly called "the abomination of desolation," as being detestable for their idolatry, and as laying waste all before them) erecting their standards upon the holy ground, and investing Jerusalem. Let this be considered as a signal, that you must immediately quit the place, which is about to be demolished, and retreat to the mountainous part of the country, for the preservation of your lives. Without regarding your substance, or even your apparel, fly upon the very first notice, with the utmost haste; or you will perish in the general calamity. These troubles will be peculiarly distressing: they will be fraught with woe to pregnant women, and to the mother, whose tender infant still hangs upon her breast. Do you, also, pray, that your departure may not happen in the winter, and that the day of your flight may not be the sabbath. The former would add new hazards to your escape, and new horrors to your banishment; whilst the latter, in its necessity, would disturb that sacred, invaluable rest, and aggravate the griefs of the fugitive from Zion and Jerusalem."

"As to this unhappy people, who are devoted to destruction, their case will be most deplorable indeed. For the afflictions, which await them, will be extreme, far surpassing every instance that has yet been known, or that shall occur again. A most tremendous slaughter shall take place among them; and those, who escape the edge of the sword, shall be dispersed, in a state of wretched captivity, among all the nations of the world.

* Dan. ix. 26.

Their well-fortified city shall be razed to its very foundations, and remain in the possession of the Gentiles, till God's appointed time for the triumph of the Gentiles shall be completed.' Should the horrid carnage and devastation continue long, the whole Jewish race would be quite extirpated. But God, 'who still retains a purpose of mercy towards them, will preserve them as a separate people; agreeably to that declaration, 'Destroy it not,' for a blessing is in it*."

"During these troubles, many deceivers will arise, and, under the assumed character of the Messiah, promise deliverance. By specious arts and uncommon operations, they will obtain much credit; and, if the grace of God did not prevent, they would even pervert from the truth my chosen followers. But you are required to take heed; and these my predictions may be the means of your security. Be not, therefore, induced to join any vain pretenders; for the calamities which I have foretold, are unavoidable. The Son of Man will come, as he hath said, 'like the lightning, which is sudden and terrible in its appearance, and irresistible in its effects. He will come, as in flaming fire, to plead the cause of his Gospel, and to inflict exemplary vengeance on his enemies. Under his commission, the Roman soldiers, bearing the eagle on their standards, shall fly to the destruction of this devoted nation, as the devouring eagles to their prey. The awful desolation shall, also, be attended, even as my final advent, with many surprising sights in the heavens, and with great commotions, anguish, and terror upon the earth."

* Isa. lxx. 8.

Before

Before we proceed further with our Lord's solemn admonitions, let us pause awhile, and seriously meditate on these prophecies, so express and circumstantial, as to deserve our most earnest regard. They are so strong, as to be sufficient of themselves, were there no other evidence, to prove the truth of the Gospel. If the events have not answered these descriptions, then may Jesus be rejected as a base impostor, and his whole system of doctrine derided, as no better than an artful fiction. But, if indeed what he minutely foretold has been exactly accomplished, what shall we say? Can there a doubt remain, concerning his mission, or the respect which is due to him?

It is generally allowed, that those effects, which are clearly and undeniably miraculous, when produced in support of any position, are a full and incontestable confirmation of it. Now prophecies are no other than miracles, perhaps the most striking, which can possibly be exhibited. To predict future events, which lie beyond the reach of conjecture, and which at the time appear highly improbable; to do this in a circumstantial manner, is as wonderful, and as plainly shews a divine interposition, as opening the eyes of the blind, or raising the dead to life. Yet this is what the Saviour has done. Nay, he has delivered such prophecies, as yet continue to be fulfilled among ourselves. These, therefore, are like a standing miracle, and afford us a stronger attestation of his Gospel, than even those were favoured with, who both saw and heard him.

He declared, as we have remarked upon the subject before us, many things which were unlikely to take place,

place, and which he could not have pointed out by any human acuteness or penetration. They were, also, most offensive to the people around him, and such, therefore, as impostors, whose grand aim is to conciliate favour, would never have asserted. Nor is the application of his words doubtful: they are so express and particular, as to seem more like a history of the past, than a prediction of the future. In confirmation of this remark, we appeal to those, who have related the facts as they really happened. Josephus, a Jewish writer, is in this view one of the strongest advocates for Christianity. He was present in the Roman camp at the destruction of Jerusalem, an eye witness of the desolations of the siege and the capture; and his account so exactly verifies our Lord's declarations, as to furnish the best comment upon them. We might conclude, that the historian himself 'was raised up and preserved by the providence of God, on purpose to attest the truth of the Gospel, even contrary to his own intentions.

It would be unsuitable to our contracted plan to produce large extracts from different authors, in support of the words of Christ, or to give a distinct exposition of the Evangelists. But it may be proper to fix our regard on a few remarkable particulars, which correspond to the predictions before us.

The temple of Jerusalem has been destroyed by the very people, whom our Lord mentioned. Yet that event was unlikely, considering the peace which then subsisted, and the strength of the fortress, which was generally thought impregnable. The Romans did not

wish to demolish the holy citadel: the commander issued out his orders and laboured earnestly to preserve it; and when he found his own schemes baffled, he was so struck, as to declare, that the Jews must be under the avenging hand of God.* All the preceding and attendant circumstances, also, fell out as Jesus had described; such as seditions, famines, earthquakes, eclipses, meteors, a comet which resembled a flaming sword hanging over Jerusalem, and contending armies in the air: such also, were the immense slaughter of the Jews, and the entire subjection of those, who survived the massacre. The bare relation of the extreme distress and anguish, universally felt on that melancholy occasion, would be enough to draw tears of compassion from the most obdurate enemy.

The remarkable deliverance of the Christians, likewise, fulfilled our Lord's words. For many of them, observing the appointed signal, fled from the devoted city, and were rescued from destruction. They were separated, as the Israelites from the midst of the Egyptians; and "their lives were given unto them for a prey."

The very rapid propagation of the Gospel, which was preached in all the principal nations of the known world before Jerusalem was taken, is another striking fact, which proves that Jesus is a true prophet. Christian churches were very early planted in various kingdoms upon the ruins of idolatry; which must have previously appeared utterly improbable, and can be ascribed only to the divine interposition. A doctrine, very opposite to men's carnal affections, and striking at
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the root of all the religions then established, made its way with surprising energy, in spite of all human wisdom and power, which were employed to oppose it. The instruments, also, of accomplishing this work, were in themselves so weak and contemptible, as to shew that their success was miraculous. They were indeed, as their Lord foretold, universally hated and persecuted, beyond any other people, for their system of faith; yet they prevailed. What, then, shall we say? Does not such a victory, such a completion of an express prophecy, furnish a strong argument for the truth and authority of the Gospel?

In the same view, we appeal to the dispersion of the Jews. Their city and temple were laid in ruins, and their frequent attempts to rebuild them have turned to their greater confusion. Julian, the Roman Emperor, encouraging them to it, was several times baffled in his profane purpose by the eruption of balls of fire from the earth, which consumed the artificers and their materials. No other reason can be given than this, that God will not suffer the declaration of his Son to fail, "Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles," for a determined season. We see the Jews unable to recover the holy land, scattered over the face of the earth, and for above seventeen hundred years deprived of the true exercise of their ancient religion. Even now, in their best circumstances, they enjoy but the precarious toleration of that which remains, and are united in no form of civil government. Contemplating their destitute condition, and their want of almost all the common bonds of union, we wonder that they
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are still a separate people, and still preserved. Most other ancient nations are long since extinct, their posterity being mixed and lost in the general mass of mankind. But the Jews incorporate with no others; they remain perfectly unconnected with the various communities, where they are permitted to dwell, and are as so many witnesses of the truth both of the old and new Testament, for they have fulfilled the prophecies of both.

From these scriptures we are likewise led to expect their future restoration, which is as clearly foretold as their dispersion. We have every reason, therefore, to believe, that it shall certainly be accomplished, when “the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” Indeed, the Jews seem to be preserved in their present distinct state, for that very end: and, whenever their return shall take place, it will introduce a greater enlargement of the Church, than has ever yet been known. “For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world; what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead*?”

Yet, while we mourn for the present blindness of Israel, let us be solicitous for ourselves, that we may not despise and reject the Saviour, as they have done. We trace the whole of their unparalleled calamities to that one sin: and is it not as offensive to God in us, as in the Jews? Will it not infallibly bring down upon us his fierce indignation? Can we be so infatuated, as to shew a contempt for the Gospel, while we behold

* Rom. xi. 15.

that devoted nation marked out by the curse of God for this very reason? And may we not fear, that many readers, with an external profession of Christianity, do not pay a serious regard to the great Prophet of our God, but make light of all his gracious proposals? Shall you, then, escape for your iniquity? He, “whom man despiseth, whom the nation abhorreth,” cometh to devour his adversaries, by a destruction infinitely more tremendous than that of Jerusalem. And, if you continue to resist him, how will you “abide the day of his coming? how will you stand, when he appeareth?”

Of that his final advent, and the awful solemnities attending it, our Lord proceeded to warn his disciples, after having described his appearance to take vengeance on the Jewish nation. He was evidently led from the consideration of one event to that of the other: and, many of the concomitant circumstances being exactly similar, we may be the less surprised at the difficulty of deciding, to which some of his expressions are to be referred. They may be true of both; or they may be applicable to one in a lower, and to the other in a more exalted meaning. Nor should this be objected to, as it is perfectly agreeable to the language of prophecy, especially when any occurrence is represented as the sign or earnest of something more remote*. In such cases the transition is frequently made, before

* “Una eademque oratio, dispari sensu accepta, plures simul eventus, disjunctos tempore, natura dissimiles, designat.”

Lowth De sacra poesi Hebr. Prælect. xi. See also Bp. Hurd's Introduction to the Study of the Prophecies.

we are aware; and the former subject resumed, which seemed for awhile to be dropped.

The destruction of Jerusalem is a pledge to us of the future judgment. As the Jewish polity was totally subverted immediately after the calamities mentioned above, so Jesus reminds us that he will come quickly, to put an end to the present frame and system of things. When all those preceding dispensations, which are predicted, shall be fully accomplished, the whole fabric of this visible creation shall be shaken, and He will appear in the clouds of heaven with glorious majesty. While every eye shall see him, an inexpressible consternation shall take place among all the families of the earth, and ten thousand times ten thousand shall be confounded at his presence. A separation shall then be made. As he rescued his faithful disciples from the Jewish devastation, so he will be mindful of all his chosen people, and preserve them amidst the terrors of the last day. He will commission his Angels to gather them together, and conduct them to glory. O joyful hour to them, who are redeemed to God from the earth! You, who have fled for refuge to the Saviour, may welcome his approach, and rejoice at those awful events, which will hasten the consummation of your bliss. In the prospect of it, you may look up with triumphant exultation, for it will not be long delayed.

Jesus observed to his disciples, that, as they considered the first budding of the trees an intimation of the return of summer, so they might judge from the hints which he gave them, when the important change was drawing nigh. He assured them, that the holy
city

city should be destroyed, before that generation should be extinct; and accordingly, in about forty years it was totally demolished. He declared, also, that, though the whole frame of the material world shall perish, not one particle of his prophecies shall fail. The final dissolution, then, of all things will certainly take place; but the precise time is not revealed, for it remains a deep and unsearchable secret in the mind of the eternal Father. Yet, if no such particular warnings be afforded us of the last day, as of the desolation of Judea, we should be continually looking forwards to it, with the utmost awe and solemnity of mind.

According to our Lord's admonition, his appearance, whensoever it shall be, will be sudden and terrible: as the flood swept away the generation of Noah, he will surprise and destroy many in the midst of their worldly occupations and sensual enjoyments. The sinners, who are at ease, shall instantly be overwhelmed with confusion and horror; and an awful distinction shall be made between many of those, who may then be in the same house or field, engaged together in the same employment. They, who are most intimately united upon earth, may hereafter be parted asunder, and unalterably appointed to different states, as they may differ in their characters. "One shall be taken" to the presence, the glory, and the throne of God; "and the other left" to receive the due reward of his deeds, and endure the fierceness of divine wrath.

What a tremendous subject is this! Can we forget it, or treat it with levity? Why are we not more affected by the thought, that "the Judge standeth before

before the door?" He will summon us to his bar; and we must "give account of ourselves to him." How shall we abide the scrutiny of that strict and impartial trial? We hear that some shall be separated from their dearest connections in life, and consigned to a place of misery. Does not this excite in us a holy jealousy for ourselves, and rouse us to enquire, what is to be done? Let us listen to our Lord's application, in which he exhorts us to a serious and continual preparation for his coming.

Is it an unquestionable truth, that "He will judge the world in righteousness?" And is the time uncertain? How proper is the inference, "Watch ye therefore—take heed to yourselves—and pray always—be ye ready!" Keep at a distance from every thing, which would expose you to his displeasure, or be inconsistent with an habitual expectation of his advent. Beware, lest on any occasion your hearts be oppressed by intemperance or an inordinate attention to secular affairs; for these would bring a stupor upon you, and prevent you from possessing, as you ought, a constant readiness to meet your Lord. Ah! how many will be found in such a thoughtless state, that they will be surprised and overwhelmed with horror at his appearance! It is necessary, therefore, that you exercise an unceasing vigilance and circumspection, if you would escape the confusion and misery, which they will endure.

How carefully do you guard your habitations against designs of violence in the night season! If you had any reason to apprehend an assault from robbers, you would not dare to compose yourselves to sleep. Though

you know not the particular hour when the attack may be made, you will provide for the security of your persons, families, and property, and take every previous measure to defeat the invader's purposes. O be wise for eternity! Should your Lord come upon you unawares, the consequence would be infinitely more terrible, than the ransacking of your houses by the midnight plunderer. Be therefore jealous guardians, where negligence must be followed by destruction.

Your present situation in the Church of Christ is like that of servants and stewards, to whom their master, upon his departure, hath intrusted the affairs of his family, and assigned their proper employment. It should be your concern, then, to be faithful and diligent, attending to your appointed work, that, when your Lord returns, he may find you occupied in your place, and you may give up your accounts with joy. If such be your readiness to meet him, you will be inconceivably blessed. Marks of distinguished honour, and the possession of an everlasting kingdom, will be conferred upon you. Will not the prospect of that glory support and comfort you in all your difficulties, and animate you to greater exertions of zeal and self-denial?

How strange is that indifference which men discover about their eternal state! Many, evidently, resemble the treacherous and wicked servant, who, presuming upon his master's longer absence, neglects and abuses his trust by oppression and intemperance.

Being surprised in his folly, and unexpectedly called to account, he will be punished with severest vengeance.

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O do not thus flatter yourselves, that, because death and judgment may be far distant, you may safely indulge in sensual excesses ! Your Lord may come, when you are least aware, while you are totally engrossed with pleasurable schemes : and then what terror and anguish will seize and rend your guilty souls ! As he will be inexorable, “ he will cut you asunder, and appoint you your portion with the hypocrites : there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

But were these solemn exhortations of Jesus designed for you ? Yes : he himself has made the universal application ; for he declares, “ What I say unto you, I say unto all, WATCH.” O live in a constant mindfulness of that word ! Fly to him for mercy, before he come to execute judgment ; and seek for the renewing influence of his Spirit, that “ you may walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing.” Then shall you be able to meet him at the last with that triumphant acclamation, “ Lo, this is our God, we have waited for him, and he will save us : this is the Lord, we have waited for him, we will be glad, and rejoice in his salvation *.” Amen.

* Isa. xxv. 9.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 35.

Jesus inculcated a serious preparation for his coming, by the parables of the ten virgins, and of the talents, and then gave a particular description of the last judgment.

THE Son of man will come again, but not as in the days of his humiliation. He will come, not as “a man of sorrows,” but as “the Lord of glory;” not to offer himself a sacrifice, but to execute judgment; not to contend with the opposition of sinners, but to manifest the character, and determine the everlasting condition, of each individual in the whole human race. He himself has told us, that he will return for these very purposes, and we profess to expect it. “What manner of persons,” then, “ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hastening unto the coming of the day of God * !”

We have already contemplated the Saviour, as he sat upon the mount of Olives, foretelling his final advent, and exhorting his disciples to make a suitable preparation. We shall now consider the conclusion of his solemn address on the same occasion, in which

* 2 Pet. iii. 11, 12.

he gives stronger and sublimer representations of that grand event, and enforces the duty of constant watchfulness and diligent application to our proper work. May we proceed to the interesting subject with true seriousness of mind, and with fervent prayer, that it may produce its due influence upon us!

By an affecting parable, Jesus exhibited the present state of things in his visible Church, the different characters of its members, and the different reception they will meet with from him at the last day *. Ten virgins are described as attending at the celebration of a marriage, and preparing to meet the bridegroom, that they may conduct his bride by the light of their lamps, according to the ancient custom of nuptials in the east. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Bridegroom here signified, who will shortly come to complete the union with his illustrious spouse, and receive her to his own glorious kingdom. In the mean time, all those, who profess the Gospel, are required to hold themselves in a state of readiness, that they may obey his summons, and accompany him on that occasion to his heavenly mansions. Such was the office of the virgins: ah! how widely did they differ from each other! "Five of them were wise, and five were foolish." Yet this difference was not easily discernible till the closing scene. They all took their lamps, as if they were properly prepared to attend upon the bridegroom, and waited for his appearance. But the wise only were furnished with oil, sufficient to supply their lamps, when their original stock should be exhausted. The

* Matt. xxv. 1, &c.

foolish provided not for a future hour: they were satisfied with just so much, as would afford them light for the present.

An apt resemblance is here exhibited of an awful distinction, which really subsists among the professing followers of Christ, however it may now be concealed from us by specious disguises. Such as are evidently careless, and have not even the shew of piety, come not under the description of the parable. Their danger is too manifest to be doubted. But of those, who seem to be strictly religious, and warmly attached to the service of Christ, all possess not the same holy principle in their hearts. Some only are truly "wise unto salvation," being inwardly what their external profession imports. They have received forgiveness of their sins, and are renewed in righteousness, so that, whenever their Lord shall come, they will be found an acceptable people in his sight. The vital and operative influence of divine grace dwells within them, and is their security for a future day: by this they persevere to the end, and therefore will be saved.

Others, alas! with fair appearances deceive both themselves and the Church around them. They "have a form of godliness," which procures them esteem; and with this they are content. They may be regular in their conduct; and blameless before men; they may be zealous for right doctrines, and strict in all ritual observances of religion. Yet they are "foolish," in neglecting to look forward and provide for death and judgment. They may make a glittering shew for the present; but possessing not "the new heart

heart and the new spirit," nor being truly united to Christ, they cannot endure the approaching trial, or be "meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light." The Lord alone can infallibly discern this great difference between persons, whose professions and appearances are the same: but it becomes us to search ourselves, for our character and state will soon be determined for ever.

Through the delay of the bridegroom, the painfulness of watching overcame the virgins: the protracted duty of a sentinel wearied their spirits, and they were all tempted to indulge themselves in sleep. Ah! what remissness and stupor do we perceive among real as well as nominal Christians! While death and judgment are thought to be at a distance, do we not sink down into a spiritual languor and supineness? Have not worldly cares and sensual gratifications a tendency to deprive our souls of their proper vigour and activity? We sleep, when we ought to be awake, and, instead of waiting to meet our Lord, have need to be roused from our lethargy. That this should be the case with those, who possess not the power of godliness, is no wonder. But it is strange indeed, that true believers should fall into such a torpor: and yet few even of them preserve that heavenly frame of mind, which consists in an habitual looking for the Saviour.

The approach of the bridegroom was at length announced. The solemn summons was proclaimed at midnight, "Behold the bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet him." The virgins arose, and immediately endeavoured to put themselves in a state

of readiness. And now, the foolish discovered their own negligence and deficiency; but it was too late to find a remedy. Their lamps were entirely gone out. In vain they implored a supply of oil from the wife, who had no more than was absolutely necessary for themselves. In vain they attempted to purchase. The warning was too short: the bridegroom was at hand. They only, who were wise, were prepared to meet him, and admitted to partake of the marriage feast. "The door was shut," to the exclusion of all others: though the foolish earnestly solicited to be received, they were rejected with abhorrence.

How awful will be the notice of death and judgment! Must it not effectually rouse and awaken every soul of man? "The hypocrites in Zion" will be thrown into the utmost consternation and horror, when they perceive their real state, and find that their former light of false profession and false hope is entirely extinguished, and that it will then profit them nothing. When they are about to be summoned to the bar of God, they may try, perhaps, to make preparation, and call on all around to help them. But in vain: their day of grace is expired, and no further mercy is to be obtained. They must be taken away, as they are, nor can they be admitted into the heavenly kingdom, however they may "cry with a great and exceeding bitter cry." Alas! to what purpose had they maintained a profession of religion so long? Their formal services, their cold and hypocritical attendance upon religious ordinances will then appear utterly

utterly unavailing. No such petition, as " Lord, Lord, open to us," will be accepted: they are excluded for ever.

But those, who have been " found in the faith," will be unspeakably blessed. They may be overtaken in a state of very culpable negligence; yet it is not the sleep of the insincere. Notwithstanding their failures and declensions, they preserve a supreme love to God and an habitual union with Christ. They are, therefore, actually " ready," though they may be surprised in a frame of mind, not so lively and spiritual as they ought at all times to possess. Upon the first intimations of their Lord's approach, they may be perplexed; but they are safe: they shall enter with him into his kingdom, and sit down at his table. And " blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb*." ,

Jesus has taught us to make a proper application of the parable. As we know not at what hour we shall be summoned to meet him, he enjoins us to maintain a constant vigilance, and to wait with unclosed eye-lids the signals of his appearance. Let us seek for his pardoning and renewing grace, through the merit of his blood and the influence of the Holy Ghost: and, being thus reconciled to God, " let us watch and be sober." If we expect the coming of our Lord, what have we to do with self-indulgence? O " let us not sleep as do others," nor be content merely to escape condemnation, but " give diligence, that an entrance may be ministered unto us abundantly, into

* Rev. xix. 9.

the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ * !”

He continued to warn his disciples of the last judgment, and by another parable urged the necessity of activity in his service, as in that, which we have just considered, he had inculcated a holy watchfulness. One, of a similar nature and tendency, had been delivered before †; but we need not be anxious to avoid a repetition of instructions so important.

A person of rank and property is represented, as departing to a distant country, and previously committing the care of his substance to his servants, that they may improve it for his use. He distributed his effects among them in shares of different value, to one five talents, to another two, and to another one, according to their respective ability. Thus, also, Jesus deals with his Church. He is the great Lord and Proprietor of all; and, as every thing is derived from him, every thing should be employed with a view to his glory. He is gone into heaven; but those, who are called by his name, are required, in his absence, to manage his concerns. All our possessions, advantages, and opportunities, our natural capacities, and the gifts of providence, which we enjoy, are granted to us, not as our own absolute right, but as a temporary trust. We are enjoined to turn them to the best account, to make them our commercial store, for the diffusion and interchange of blessings, that we may promote the honour of God and the advancement of true religion. This, however, cannot be effected without great exertions and unwearied assiduity.

* 2 Pet. i. 10, 11. † Luke xix. 12—27. See Sect. 30.

What, then, was the conduct of these servants? The two, who had received most, improved and even doubled their stock by a diligent application: but the man, to whom the one talent was committed, being secretly disaffected to his master, refused to make any use of it whatever. Our Lord meant not to intimate, that those, who are placed in the most eminent situations, are most faithful and laborious in doing his work; for fact and experience often prove the contrary. But the representation was rather intended to teach us, that they, who enjoy the fewest advantages, are accountable to him. Blessed be God there are those in his Church, who move in the highest and most enlarged sphere with credit to their profession, and extensive benefit to others. They who are truly devoted to him, and live under the influence of his grace, cannot allow themselves in habitual indolence. Their heart's desire is to embrace every opportunity and exert all their faculties, that they may render themselves of real use, in their generation. Do we answer this description? Are there not many among us, who, with peculiar gifts, are doing nothing, or nothing to the purpose? And is it not disgraceful to be as drones, an incumbrance, instead of a blessing, to society? Or is no danger to be apprehended from such a conduct? Let us attend to the issue.

The servants were continued in their trust for a considerable time; but at length their master returned, and called them to a strict account. Thus, in due season, Jesus will be revealed from heaven, and it will be one great end of his appearance, to reckon with

with us. Yes: he will demand of us, and it will be publicly declared, what has been our plan of life, in what manner we employed the deposit, which he left under our care.

The diligent and faithful servants were distinguished by their lord's approbation, and received a large recompense. They represented with humble gratitude, what he had enabled them to do. They owned his goodness, and gave him the praise. With kind condescension, he instantly applauded their fidelity, and rewarded their exertions with a proportionable share of preferment. Such will be the favourable acceptance, which believers, who have lived not unto themselves, but unto Jesus their exalted Master, shall meet with from him at his final advent. They are indebted to him for their whole salvation, and they will acknowledge their best obedience to be the fruit of his love. This, however, he determines to exhibit before the assembled universe, for his own honour as well as for their happiness. He will declare himself well pleased in their upright and zealous endeavours to promote his glory, and assign them a portion of the felicities of his kingdom. It should, also, be remarked as an instance and proof of his mercy, no less than of his righteousness, that he will approve in his people those very works, which they performed only by the influence of his Spirit, and that he will bestow upon them rewards, adjusted to the various degrees of their faithfulness and assiduity.

What, then, became of the slothful servant? He seems to have flattered himself, that he was safe, at
least,

least, if not worthy of commendation, because he had not squandered away the money committed to him. He presumed even to vindicate his conduct by the most injurious representations of his master, as requiring what was severe, unreasonable, unjust, or impossible. But his very pleas were urged against him, and formed the ground of his condemnation; for they shewed his baseness, inconsistency, and malignant disposition towards his lord. He was, accordingly, turned out with disgrace from the trust which he had abused, and sentenced to a state of endless imprisonment and consummate wretchedness.

This is an awful description of the present character and final doom of those, who are "idle and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." Possibly, they may have the most confident expectations of escaping punishment, because their behaviour is inoffensive; and they may not be undeceived, till they are called to give up their accounts. But on that occasion no one will be excused, merely because he has done no harm, even if such a pretence were true. It will be enquired, how much real and positive good has been effected. Do any dare to hope, that the great difficulties of a religious life, for which their strength is unequal, will justify their indolence? They should be reminded, that the more arduous their work appears, the more strenuous exertions are necessary, and that the weakness, of which they complain, is not to be charged upon God, as it is no other than their own extreme depravity, a confirmed hatred of God and holiness. Their notions that the obedience, which
God

God requires, is unpleasant, impracticable, and a tyrannical imposition, are false, and evince a deep malignity of mind. These, therefore, will be produced against them to their entire confusion. Even on their own principles, their conduct should be far different; and, whatever they may talk of their inability, they will be condemned for their negligence. To be "slothful," in the language of the parable, is to be "wicked;" and those who are "unprofitable," that is, useless in their place and generation, shall be finally excluded from God and happiness, and consigned to everlasting torment and despair; where they may for ever bewail their folly, but must continue to feel its effects in a state of unutterable anguish.

The proper conclusion, then, is, that the present life is not a time for loitering. You must expect the return of your Lord to reckon with you; and, therefore, you must not only wait for him, but diligently apply to his work. It is not enough, that you avoid gross and scandalous offences, or be harmless in society. If no fruits of righteousness are produced, no glory brought to God, no benefit accrue to his Church, through your labours of faith and love, you must hear that tremendous sentence, "Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Jesus proceeded to enforce these awful admonitions in the most explicit terms, without the obscurity of a parable, describing his future advent, and the manner in which the last judgment will be conducted. The passage, as it stands in the Evangelist, is singularly sublime

sublime and affecting. It sets before us a scene the most grand and interesting, which can possibly be conceived. All in heaven, and all on earth are convened together, (an immense, and innumerable company !) while their Creator and their Governor, taking his seat upon a throne of glorious majesty, enters into a strict examination of every human character, and appoints to all the children of Adam their proper places, either in happiness or misery for ever. We are here, then, obliged to consider ourselves before the great tribunal, in the midst of the assembled universe.

Every eye is fixed upon the person of the Judge. It is "the Son of man," who assumed our nature, and once dwelt among us in a state of profound humiliation. How different from the first, is this his second advent ! He comes with supreme authority, and displays the brightness and perfections of Deity. It is the time of his public manifestation, when the dignity and excellency of his character, which were obscured during his residence on the earth, are known and confessed by all. And are we not constrained from the very description before us to own, that Jesus is "the Lord of glory," "over all, God blessed for ever ?" Considering the grandeur of his appearance, and his illustrious retinue, attended as he is by all the holy Angels ; considering, too, the nature of his office, which implies that he possesses no less than omniscience and a sovereign power of determining the final state of all mankind, and of closing the gates of heaven and hell for ever ; we cannot hesitate to conclude that he

is Jehovah. O let us give him, what he is worthy to receive, our unfeigned and supreme reverence, confidence, and love! Let "every knee bow at his name, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord."

The whole human race are gathered together before him, and stand to take their trial at his bar. But his all-discerning eye separates them into two classes, according to their characters; and in this division the one need fear no mistake, nor the other presumptuously expect it. His faithful people, who have owned him as their Shepherd, and who were redeemed and defended by him as the sheep of his flock, are placed on his right hand; and on his left are all those, who have continued in opposition to him, in the uncleanness of their natural corruption, and who are therefore hateful in his sight.

With a solemnity and majesty, which no words can describe, he proceeds to pass the irrevocable sentence. The King of glory speaks, declaring his affectionate regard for those on his right hand, as being dear to his Father and distinguished by his grace. He welcomes them to his presence, and commands them to enter into the immediate possession of that inheritance, which had been originally appointed for them in the divine counsels. Yet, as that is "the day of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God," he justifies his favour to them, and proves undeniably the equity of his dispensations. To this end he produces to public view the works of righteousness, which they have performed through faith, and from love to his name.

name. Their acts of kindness in relieving and comforting his afflicted and oppressed people, he exhibits as an evidence, that they are the very persons, to whom the promises are made. They themselves, it should seem, would not presume to mention their best exertions in his service: these do not constitute the ground of their dependence. Nay, they express their wonder, that He should speak, in terms of such honourable regard and approbation, of their obedience and zeal, which they had scarcely been conscious of, and knew to be unworthy of his notice. But he confirms the sentence, and graciously declares that he accepts and recompenses what they have done for the meanest member of his Church, as if it were done to himself.

In the mean time, the impenitent and unbelieving are filled with horror and dismay, waiting to receive their doom. The King Omnipotent turns to them, and, to evince his holy indignation at the baseness of their conduct, bids them to depart from him, under the weight of his curse, into a state of endless torment. There they must be companions of those apostate spirits, the Devil and his angels, with whom they were confederate in rebellion. Nor is this the decree of a merciless tyrant, but the appointment of a righteous Judge. Accordingly, he proceeds to bring forth the strongest evidence against them, and proves from their disobedience, unbelief, and contempt of his name, that they deserve this heavy condemnation. Their neglect of those duties of mercy, which he indispensably requires as the fruits of faith and love,

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clearly manifests their character, and justifies his decision. Many of them in this life appear not to be sensible of their guilt, and even rise up in their own vindication: but if, at that day, they should presume to deny the charge, it will be substantiated from the unerring testimony of the King himself, to their entire confusion. He will convict them of falshood and hypocrisy, in pretending a regard to him, when they have despised his poor members; and therefore he will declare, that his sentence against them shall stand.

It remains only, that the determination of the Judge be carried into effect. Accordingly, those, who come under his condemnation, are driven away from his presence, and consigned to that tremendous punishment, from which there can be no release: and those, who are justified before him, immediately receive the consummation of their bliss and glory, which will be durable as the existence of God himself.

This important description leads us to observe,

1. That good works will obtain an honourable notice at the last day. God forbid, therefore, that we should not now give them their proper consequence and attention. The enquiry at the tribunal of Christ, as here represented, will be instituted concerning the evidences of our faith. Our obedience will be produced to prove the sincerity of our religious professions, and the strength as well as reality of our principles. This testimony will be required, not for the information or satisfaction of the Judge, who is intimately acquainted with every case, and with the
very

very secrets of all hearts, but for the exhibition of his own righteous character before the universe. We perceive, too, that a special regard will be paid to acts of Christian kindness and liberality. Much stress is laid upon love, as peculiarly pleasing to God: upon that love, which shews itself in vigorous exertions for the support and consolation of those, who belong to the family of Christ. This, which is the necessary fruit of faith, maintains, in all its efforts, a continual respect to the Saviour; on which account it is honoured with so high a commendation. But this is essentially different from that vain, indiscriminate generosity, which proceeds not from right motives, and which, though admired by the world, is offensive to God. We observe, also,

2. That the sins of unbelievers will be publicly declared in the day of judgment. We cannot be concealed from the piercing eye of God. Every instance of our misconduct is noted down in his book; and, if we do not now obtain remission through the blood of the cross, all will be produced against us at the solemn reckoning. No man will be condemned without evidence, and the evidence against sinners will be so strong and incontestable, as to silence their pleas, and confound them before their Judge. The habitual neglect of known duties, no less than the actual commission of gross iniquity, will exclude us from heaven; since the former, as well as the latter, will prove the heart unsound. This is, indeed, a most alarming consideration; and yet it necessarily follows from our Lord's description. Those, who are destitute of love,

or not actuated by a supreme-regard to Christ to lay themselves out for the benefit of his Church, shall hear the tremendous sentence, "Depart from me, ye cursed."

What, then, is to be done? Let us be solicitous to obtain that faith, which "worketh by love." Let us pray to be united to Jesus, as living branches of the true vine; that we may be "filled with the fruits of righteousness," and "have boldness in the day of judgment." Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 36.

*Jesus celebrated the passover—washed his disciples' feet
—instituted the Eucharist—declared the treachery of
Judas, and the approaching fall of Peter.*

IT was love, which brought down the Saviour from heaven; a love, which must astonish those, who seriously contemplate its inexpressible dimensions; a love, which is constant, immutable, and everlasting. This principle appeared to actuate him during the whole of his abode on earth; and especially toward the close of his life every minute circumstance was so ordered, as to shew the strength and tenderness of his affection for the dear followers, whom he had chosen to himself. He retained his little family about him, all of whom except one, had been sincerely attached to him; and now, though he was about to depart from them, his kindness was undiminished: he continued most ardently desirous of promoting their happiness, even to the latest moment*. We also may rejoice, that He is "the Lord, who changeth not;" and that he has expressly declared to every believer, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

* John xiii. 1.

A general account is given us of the manner, in which he spent the few days immediately preceding his death. He constantly attended the temple, where he taught the people with unwearied assiduity, and retired each evening to the mount of Olives, probably for the purposes of devotion *. On the Tuesday, after delivering the instructions which we have considered, he warned his disciples, that he should be betrayed and crucified at the approaching festival †. Then also, as it should seem, while the rulers were consulting, how they might destroy him without raising a public commotion, Judas went and bargained with them for a paltry sum of money, the common price of a slave, treacherously to surrender up his Master into their hands.

Thursday in
Passion week.

On the morning of Thursday, Jesus commanded two of his disciples to make the necessary preparations for celebrating the pass-over ‡. But as they were destitute of an habitation of their own, where could they assemble together for the purpose? This difficulty was soon removed; and the manner of its removal proved, that Jesus possessed a clear knowledge of all events, and exercised a full authority over every heart. He described to his chosen messengers the place and circumstances, in which they should meet the servant of one; who would be

* Luke xxi. 37, 38. Bethany lay at the foot of this mount, and perhaps our Lord spent some part of his evenings with his beloved friends in that town. See Sect. 32. Matt. xxi. 17.

† Matt. xxvi. 1—5, 14—16. Mark xiv. 1, 2, 10, 11. Luke xxii. 1—6.

‡ Matt. xxvi. 17—20. Mark xiv. 12—17. Luke xxii. 7—18.

immediately

immediately disposed to receive them into his house. There they provided the paschal lamb; and thither he repaired with the twelve, at the proper hour of the evening, for the observation of the holy solemnity. When they were set down together, he addressed them with peculiar tenderness, assuring them that he had felt an earnest desire to partake of that passover with them, before he quitted the world. He then directed, that they should divide the cup of wine among themselves, (which was an usual ceremony at the beginning of the paschal supper) and declared, that he would no more drink of the fruit of the vine, till God should introduce his kingdom, and the object of that ordinance should be fulfilled.

The Jewish sacrament, here mentioned, exhibited in a typical manner some of the grand blessings of the Gospel. It was appointed to preserve a remembrance of the deliverance of the Israelites, when the destroying Angel slew all the first-born of the Egyptians*, and, at the same time, to represent the security, which the true Israel shall receive through the shedding of the blood of Jesus. He is the end and substance of the ordinance; and for that very reason it was designed, that he should be betrayed at the particular season, and on the very night, when the paschal lamb was killed, that he might more exactly answer to the type. "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast †," not the Jewish, but the Christian festival; and let us be solicitous, that the blood of this Lamb of God may be sprinkled upon our

* Exod. xii.

† 1 Cor. v. 7, 8.

hearts by faith; for without this we shall stand exposed to the "fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries."

It is not easy, nor is it of consequence to our plan, to settle precisely the order, of the various circumstances, which occurred at the last supper. At that time probably, but in which part of the entertainment we do not determine, Jesus submitted to assume the habit and employment of a servant, and wash the feet of his disciples *. This transaction was conducted, not in a light and trifling manner, but with a serious solemnity; and we perceive an inexpressible grandeur as well as condescension in the Saviour's deportment. Knowing that Judas had formed the scheme of betraying him, and that his own departure was near, he was desirous of improving the few remaining hours in delivering all necessary instructions to his dear disciples. For this purpose, though conscious of his great dignity, as the supreme Almighty Lord, who came down from the throne of glory in the highest heavens, and was about to return thither, he designed to exhibit a further instance of his deep humiliation. He rose up from supper, and put himself into the habit of a menial servant, that he might minister to his poor followers, and He, who was Lord of all, stooped to the very lowest office, while with his own hands he washed their feet.

We cannot but wonder at his conduct, and ask, what end it was designed to answer. It appears to have been a significant action, intended to represent the nature and efficacy of that grace, by which he pu-

* John xiii. 1—17.

rifies his people from their natural pollution. This is his own explanation. When Peter objected the unsuitableness of his exalted Master's performing so mean a service for him, Jesus replied, that this, as well as his other dispensations, would be more clearly understood hereafter, and added, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me." Are we, then, sensible of our great defilement? It is declared, that "we are all as an unclean thing*," "altogether become filthy†." Were this properly understood, it would produce in us a deep abhorrence of ourselves, and a cordial esteem for the Saviour, whose office it is to deliver us from corruption, and communicate spiritual purity. Then we should rejoice in that gracious promise, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you‡." Then we should pray, as Peter, "Lord, wash not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." Those, indeed, who are the faithful disciples of Jesus, are clean already, as he testified; but it is still necessary, even for them, to renew their application to him, that they may be freed from those pollutions, which they are daily contracting.

The action was designed, likewise, as a lesson of humility to all his people. He had frequently inculcated poverty of spirit, self-denial, meekness, and lowliness of mind: and now, to confirm the instructions he had given, he stooped to this service. He, therefore, called upon the twelve, to be consistent with their professions of regarding him as their Master and Lord, and

* Isa. lxiy. 6. † Psal. liii. 3. ‡ Ezek. xxxvi. 25.

to follow his example by a readiness to submit to mean and painful employments, for the benefit and comfort of others. He reminded them, that a similar conduct would be no disparagement to them, who were only his attendants and messengers, and that their religious knowledge would be a blessing, no farther than it produced a suitable practice.

The solemn admonition, probably, had a peculiar reference to the state of their minds. It was at that time, when a strange and unseasonable contention had arisen among them, about the chief preferment in the temporal dominion, which they still expected him to establish *. This ambitious spirit, these carnal views and affections he reprov'd. He argued, that, though a fondness for power prevailed in the Gentile world, it was inconsistent with their character and engagements, who were required to shew their eminence by condescension and meekness. He himself had appeared among them in the form of a servant. He assured them, that he did not forget their faithful and steadfast attachment through his various afflictions, and that he would recompense it by conducting them to a state of exaltation, far superior to that which they had so eagerly desired. He solemnly promised them, that they should partake of that bliss and glory, which he was going to possess, that they should there enjoy the most intimate communion with him, and even sit, like his assessors in the judgment, with marks of peculiar dignity, approving and confirming the sentence,

* Luke xxii. 24—30.

which should be pronounced upon the twelve tribes of Israel.

We also, who follow the Saviour, should be instructed to look for our preferment in the world above. Being "faithful unto death," we shall receive "a crown of life." The meanest of his servants shall hereafter obtain "a kingdom, which cannot be moved." A distinguished honour, doubtless, is reserved for the Apostles at the last day. Yet believers of a lower order may exult in the prospect of their future advancement. "Do ye not know, that the saints shall judge the world *?" Jesus himself hath declared, without respect of persons, "To him that overcometh, will I grant to sit with me in my throne †." But, for the present, this is our direction, "Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate ‡." We are forbidden to cherish ambition and avarice, envy and contention. We are strictly enjoined to forego our own interest, ease, and reputation, whenever we can thereby render ourselves more extensively useful in life. With this view we must frequently submit to such services, as may seem to diminish our consequence, and require painful and laborious exertions. This will shew that we imitate our great exemplar; and those only can claim an interest in his promises, who are willing to tread in his steps.

Where, then, shall we find those, who maintain the Christian character with consistency? Many there are, who compliment Jesus with the appellation of Lord and Master: but we ask, Do you possess the

* 1 Cor. vi. 2. † Rev. iii. 21. ‡ Rom. xii. 16.

mind, which was in Him? Is He the pattern, which you propose to yourselves for the regulation of your own spirit and practice? Are you living under the habitual influence of humility? The appearance and the language you may easily assume: but does the disposition itself abide in you, and govern your conduct? What means that selfishness, that pride, and eagerness for advancement, which we so frequently discover under a religious profession? How unsuitable for you, who should be dead to the world, are all contentions about honour and precedency! Do not the various commotions, by which even the Church itself is divided, prove, that there is little of real Christianity among us, because there is little conformity to Christ? Why do you decline this or the other office, to which you are called? Possibly, it may seem low and degrading in the estimation of men; it may be grating to corrupt nature; or it may obstruct your secular views. But, while you contemplate the Lord of glory washing the feet of his disciples, be ashamed of paying so much regard to your own convenience. Surely, it is not beneath you to copy after him; and to do this, you must be "as one that serveth."

Upon the same occasion, also, Jesus instituted the Eucharist, probably before they rose from the table, since it is said to be done "as they were eating." While he fulfilled in himself the ancient passover, and abolished its observance, he embraced that opportunity to ordain a new sacrament, which succeeded to it, as baptism did to circumcision. This is a rite of peculiar importance under the Gospel dispensation; and it

is not difficult to ascertain its nature and design, from the clear account which is given of its original appointment*.

Jesus took bread, and, looking up with devout affections to God for his blessing, he divided it into several shares. He then distributed it among his disciples, commanding them to receive it as an emblem of his suffering body, and in commemoration of his death. In like manner, also, he delivered to them a cup of wine, which he directed them all to partake of, as a representation of his precious blood, whereby the new Covenant is confirmed to us, and remission of sins obtained. He further declared, that he should no more join with them in that solemnity upon earth, but that they should hereafter celebrate together the sacred mysteries therein exhibited.

Such was the institution: nor can we doubt that the observance of it is binding upon us, since an Apostle has taught us, that hereby we are to “shew the Lord’s death, TILL HE COME†.” It is also manifest, from the plain and simple description before us, for what purposes, and with what temper of mind, we should communicate in this divine ordinance. Jesus himself is the grand object, which it is intended to display. He is set forth before us, as our spiritual food and sustenance. Those visible elements, bread and wine, which afford peculiar nourishment to our bodies, very fitly represent Him, who alone can maintain the life and vigour of our souls. Yet, as he does this only in

* Matt. xxvi. 26—30. Mark xiv. 22—26. Luke xxii. 19, 20.

† 1 Cor. xi. 26.

consequence of his sufferings, he is here proposed to our view, as wounded, bleeding, dying for us. His body, like the bread, was broken; his blood, like the wine, was poured out. Thus, we observe, by virtue of his sacrifice, “his flesh is meat indeed, and his blood is drink indeed *.”

The participation of this sacrament shews the necessity of receiving Christ by faith. The bread and wine must be taken, before they can yield any nutriment: and “except we eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, we have no life in us †.” Then especially, when we approach to his table, we should exercise a fixed and strong dependence upon him. Let us attend to his own injunction, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Let us bear in mind the dignity of his person, the glory which he originally possessed, and the humiliation to which he stooped. We are to regard him, not only as a bright example, or a kind benefactor, but as our High Priest, offering up himself as an atonement to God, to make reconciliation for us. Thus, while we remember the agonies, which he endured, we should “look upon him, whom we have pierced, and mourn for him ‡.” The recollection of his cross will constrain us to “abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes.”

Yet, as a holy festival, it affords a proper occasion for the exercise of lively joy. What can be so calculated to revive and gladden the heart, as the view of those inestimable benefits, which are here exhibited? What can tend more to inspire us with hope, confi-

* John vi. 55.

† vi. 53.

‡ Zech. xii. 10.

dence,

dence, love, and zeal? Nay, it is the appointed method, in which God is pleased to strengthen, quicken, and comfort his people; and, as our wants return upon us, so, by a frequent attendance on this ordinance, we should seek fresh communications of grace. We are encouraged to expect his presence and blessing, and thus are enabled to maintain a freedom of intercourse with him. Such an attendance, also, will be the means of uniting us together in the bonds of Christian fellowship, and of rendering us “kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love.” What a source of happiness is this! Yet does not the general neglect of the Lord’s table prove, that the Saviour has but a small share in our remembrances?

We do not invite sinners, who are living in ignorance and contempt of God. We warn them not to profane the solemnity by their formality and irreverence. If you feel not your need of Jesus, nor desire to please him, insult him not by presuming to “eat of his bread, and to drink of the wine which he hath mingled.” But you, who are bowed down with a sense of guilt and depravity, who earnestly wish to accept salvation on the terms of the Gospel, may approach with humble hope. Only devote your souls and your all to Jesus, and bind yourselves by a vow to serve him with all your faculties, to the last moment of your lives: and here you may expect to receive the tokens of his love, and the gracious supplies of his Spirit.

Judas was present, while our Lord declared in the strongest terms his high regard for his disciples; and it is probable, that even the traitor himself participated
of

of the holy Eucharist. But, though he had acted his part in so subtle a manner, as not to be suspected by the other Apostles, neither his character nor his designs were concealed from Jesus. At length it appeared expedient, that the rest also should be apprised of the diabolical plan of treachery, then ripe for execution. While, therefore, they were all at table together, the Saviour intimated his perfect knowledge of it: and this he did, that his chosen followers might not be staggered, when they should see one from among themselves so scandalously desert his post, but be confirmed in the faith, by observing a completion of the scriptures in that event. He exhorted them, also, to persevere in their zealous exertions for his cause, assuring them, that both he and his Father were concerned for their favourable reception in the world*.

In the view of this sad case, Jesus felt a keen anguish of spirit. He then declared more explicitly, "One of you shall betray me;" "the hand of the traitor is with me on the table;" and by certain express tokens he marked out Judas as the man, denouncing the most tremendous wo against him, though he should be the instrument of fulfilling the divine counsels. An awful consternation seized the company, and every one, suspecting himself rather than Judas, cried out, "Lord, is it I?" But that monster of iniquity remained unaffected by the solemn warning. We might have sup-

* John xiii. 18—30. Matt. xxvi. 21—25. Mark xiv. 18—21. Luke xxii. 21—23.

posed, that he would have been deterred from his purpose: but he was the more engaged, and went out immediately, under a violent instigation of the Devil, in the darkness of the night, to accomplish his infernal scheme.

Our Lord then exulted in the prospect of those blessed consequences, which would result from the treachery of Judas, as the means of completing the grand work of redemption *. He reminded his disciples, that the hour was approaching, when he himself should enter on a state of high exaltation, and bring glory to God in saving sinners by his death. Looking upon his dear followers with a tenderness of affection, like an indulgent father upon his little children, from whom he was on the point of being separated, he pressed it upon them, as his dying request, that they would continue firmly and warmly attached to one another. This he enjoined as a new command, not unknown, indeed, in former dispensations, but now enforced by fresh motives, and by an example altogether singular in its kind: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." His love to us, then, is to be the cause, the measure, and the pattern of our kindness and regard to all the members of his Church. He recommended, also, this reciprocal, cordial affection, as the strongest proof of our union with him, and the most honourable badge of our profession.

If we understand the full import of our Lord's de-

John xiii. 31, &c. Luke xvii. 31—33.

claration, " I have loved you," its influence will be irresistible. We shall not only abhor the treachery of Judas, but dread the thought of displeasing Him, who has shewn such compassion and favour toward us. Let us examine our religion on this ground: Do we scrupulously avoid all those practices and tempers, which he condemns, and endeavour to express our gratitude by our diligence and fervour in his service? Do we cultivate that principle, on which he has laid such peculiar stress, unfeigned love to his people for his sake? How excellent would be the fruits of this disposition! What peace and happiness would it produce; and how strongly would it recommend our system of faith! But we are all lamentably defective in this grace. Do not our peevishness, envy, and contention, our censoriousness, bigotry, and resentment, disgrace our profession, and betray our insincerity? Surely, it cannot now be said, as it was of the primitive Church, " See how these Christians love one another."

Jesus had intimated his approaching departure; on which Peter, though admonished that he could not follow him for the present, declared his readiness to attend him through all dangers, even to death itself. Alas! little do we know, how we shall be able to stand in the hour of trial. The boasting Apostle was reproved, and informed, that before the morning light his strong confidence should be so shaken, that he would deny in the most shameful manner all connection and acquaintance with his Lord and Master. That very night, he was told, would be a time of peculiar temptation, as Satan was desirous to practise his wiles upon
 them

them all. He was assured that his principles would be severely assaulted, and his soul preserved from total apostasy, only through the gracious intercession of the Saviour. He was further charged, to confirm the faith of his weak brethren, after his own recovery.

Such was the solemn caution given to Peter: Jesus also subjoined an affecting address to the whole company. He bad them prepare for a fore conflict, and arm themselves for the fight. They had been, till then, abundantly supplied with necessary provisions, when they went out to preach the Gospel. But he reminded them, that they would soon be so entirely destitute, as to stand in need of a purse furnished with money, a scrip with food, and a sword for their defence. He informed them further, that, as all the ancient prophecies concerning him should be exactly fulfilled, so in particular, agreeably to Isaiah's declaration, he was about to be "numbered with the transgressors," and to die as a malefactor*. Probably, they misunderstood him, as if he wished them to resist their enemies with violence. He intended only to lead their minds to the expectation of a severe opposition; and they ought to have known, that "the weapons of their warfare were not carnal †."

But, leaving for the present the case of the Apostles, let us remember for ourselves, that we also are required to "endure hardness, as good soldiers of Jesus Christ ‡." Let us be solicitous to maintain his cause, which, as a sacred deposit intrusted to us, must be kept at the hazard of our dearest temporal interests. We should

* Isa. liii. 12. † 2 Cor. x. 4. ‡ 2 Tim. ii. 3.

look for a fierce onset, and be prepared to make a vigorous defence. But the cautions, now before us, will teach us, not to depend on our own resolution and ability: for, if we be self-confident, we shall, probably, fall like Peter, and taste the bitter punishment of pride. Then, “be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.”—“Take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand *”

We see our calling: we must follow the Saviour, not to worldly honour and preferment, but to shame, contempt, and many secular disadvantages. Are we willing to hazard all consequences in his service? Let us boldly declare ourselves on his side, and entreat him so to pray for us, while Satan is sifting us as wheat, that our faith may not fail. Let us attend him to the cross, and then we shall participate of his glory. Whatever dangers may threaten, or enemies assault us, may each of us be able to say, “None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy †!” Amen.

* Eph. vi. 10, 13.

† Acts xx. 24:

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 37.

Jesus, before he quitted the guest chamber, exhorted and comforted his Apostles—represented himself as the true Vine—enforced obedience and mutual love—and predicted persecution.

THE solemn celebration of the last passover could not but make a deep impression on the minds of the disciples; and the warnings, then addressed to them, probably excited much perplexity. Their beloved Master had declared, that he should very soon be separated from them by the hand of violence, his death be accomplished through the treachery of one in their own company, and they themselves exposed to a severe assault both from men and Satan. The removal of their Lord, so justly dear to them, was in itself a distressing circumstance; and foreseeing further dangers and difficulties, when deprived of their Head, they felt increasing anguish, and were oppressed with painful apprehensions. Jesus was sensibly affected for them, and, as it should seem, more solicitous on their account than his own. Before, therefore, they retired from the guest-chamber, he renewed his exhorta-

tions, with a view to alleviate their sorrows, and inspire them with hope, confidence, and joy*.

How tender and compassionate does the Saviour appear, while instructing and comforting his mourning disciples, "as a father does his children!" How exactly calculated to revive their spirits, were the considerations here suggested! The benefit of these his last solemn addresses was designed to reach likewise even unto us. How many things do we meet with, which have a tendency to cause grief, confusion, and terror! Observing, in what a world of sin and disorder we are placed, what calamities frequently occur in human life, and how depraved and helpless we ourselves are, we shall, probably, be disposed to indulge a timorous and dejected frame of mind. What, then, is to be done? What can support and animate our souls, when dangers and distresses threaten us on every side? Let us hear the Saviour's words, and learn to apply them to our own case.

Thus he spoke: "Endeavour to lay aside your anxieties and fears, and shew the excellence of your religious principles by your composure and courage. You must, therefore, not only possess a due regard to God, as the maker, preserver, and governor of the world, but also fix your attention and reliance upon Me, as the Mediator, through whom alone you can entertain any solid hope of the divine favour, any just expectation of being safely conducted to the heavenly state. In that glorious abode, where my Father displays the lustre of his majesty, are sufficient accommodations for the whole Church, numerous as it is; and there

* John xiv. 1, &c.

you will not be disappointed of a peaceable habitation. If this had not been infallibly secure, I would not have encouraged or permitted you to look for it. I am going to that kingdom on your behalf, to prepare the way for your admission: and, as I shall enter upon the possession in your name, I will not be unmindful of you, but return for the express purpose of receiving you to my own immediate presence, that you may dwell for ever near me in that blissful inheritance, where even now I already am. After such clear declarations, you cannot mistake the place of which I speak or the road which will lead you to it."

Thomas, probably understanding him as intending to erect a temporal dominion in some particular spot, desired further information. Jesus replied; "I myself have opened an access for sinners unto God; in me the divine promises and engagements are sure and immutable; through me eternal life is secured: nor can any one, whatever be his pleas or attainments, approach to the Father,* but by means of my mediation. If, therefore, you had known my character and offices, you could not have been ignorant of Him: but now I have revealed him to you, and in me you behold the express image of his person*."

Philip expressed an ardent desire, that they might be favoured with an outward manifestation of the Father's glory. On this, our Lord reproved him for not having better understood the nature and dignity of the Master, with whom he had been so long conversant, and then declared: "In seeing me, you have

* Heb. i. 3.

in effect seen the Father. Do you not credit my solemn assertions, that I am one with him? My words demand your regard, as proceeding from Him; but if these be rejected,* the miraculous operations, which I perform by virtue of my union with Him, prove incontrovertibly the mysterious truth which I affirm."

Let us weigh the important doctrines here advanced. The question proposed to Philip, may furnish a reproof to each of us, "Hast thou not known me?" Considering the information we have had, may we not justly be ashamed, that we have not better learned the principles of our religion? Have we properly understood, who the Saviour is, and what the purposes, for which he came into the world? Have we beheld the glory of the Father so displayed in the person of the Son, as to be convinced that their nature and perfections are the same? And is not this a firm foundation for our hopes, a source of strong consolation? For do we not now perceive, that our concerns may be safely intrusted in the hands of Jesus?

But have we indeed approached unto God, through the mediation of Christ? Or shall we presume to draw near to him in any other way? Who shall open the kingdom of heaven for us? Shall we plead our own obedience, as if this would procure us admission? The door would be barred against us; nor can any entrance be obtained, but through the sacrifice, and intercession of Him, who has returned to those blissful mansions, from which he came down. He is gone to prepare a place, not for his Apostles only, but for all who believe in his name. You, therefore, who have fixed

your whole dependence upon him, are encouraged to rejoice in his exalted dignity, and the certainty of final salvation. It is your privilege, though you are now despised and afflicted, to look forward with exultation "to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you *." For yet a little while, and He, in whom you trust, shall appear in his glory, and take you up with great triumph to his beatific presence, where you shall admire, and love, and praise him for ever.

The Saviour proceeded to comfort his disciples: "Distressed as you may be at my departure, I solemnly assure you, that in consequence thereof you will obtain peculiar advantages. By virtue of my intercession, while you exercise a firm dependence upon me, you shall be enabled to perform miraculous operations, equal or superior to those, which I myself have wrought †. Nor is this too much for you to expect:

* 1 Pet i 4.

† The Apostles not only expelled demons, healed the sick, raised the dead, as Jesus had done, but dispensed spiritual gifts to immense numbers, spake various languages, which they had never learned, and preached the Gospel with a success amazingly rapid and extensive. These were, in some sense, more illustrious effects, than attended the ministry of our Lord: and yet this consideration does not weaken the argument for his Divinity, taken from his works, but rather strengthen it. For these very things were accomplished, as appears in the passage before us, by the power of the Saviour: and accordingly, the Apostles, in the miracles which they performed, confessed their dependence upon him, and ascribed the whole glory to him. They could not speak, as he did, "I say unto thee, Arise," but "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk;" and again, "Jesus Christ maketh thee whole." Luke vii. 14. viii. 54. Acts iii. 6. ix. 34.

only

only present your supplications to God in faith, and, by the energy of my own power, I will bestow the blessings, which you ask, that the glory of the Father may be displayed in the mediation of the Son."

We, also, may rejoice, that Jesus, who is gone into heaven, continues mindful of his Church on earth, and is incessantly pouring down his benefits upon it. We should be thankful for those extraordinary communications vouchsafed to the Apostles, whereby the Gospel was first propagated, and confirmed with unquestionable evidence. Let us likewise be encouraged, by the prevalency of the intercession of our exalted High Priest, to offer up our requests with humble boldness. For the promise reaches even unto us, "If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it." Ah! why are we so backward to pray, as if we had no Advocate with the Father, or as if this Advocate had no merit to plead, possessed no influence, and could exert no power on our behalf? Let us not so dishonour him, but, crediting his declarations, let us surround the throne of grace with our importunate petitions, and spread our wants before him. He is able, and he is equally willing, to supply all our necessities.

It is probable, that the Apostles expressed a peculiar warmth of affection for their dear Lord, who was about to be taken from them, and that with a reference to their professions of regard he thus continued his discourse: "Let your love appear in your uniform obedience to my injunctions; and, though I shall withdraw from you, I will entreat the Father, that you may enjoy

enjoy the consolations of his Spirit, and that for ever. The men of the world, with such carnal sentiments and dispositions, as predominate in their minds, cannot admit this divine Visitant; but you are already acquainted with his influences, and shall receive more abundant communications from him. I will not, therefore, totally and finally desert you, but will return to you in the power of the Holy Ghost. My bodily presence will be soon removed from the earth, but, through faith, you may still behold me ever near you; and as I am possessed of endless life, so, by virtue of your union with me, you shall maintain a state of spiritual vigour, and be conducted to the everlasting felicities of heaven. That promised effusion of the Spirit will convince you more fully, that I am joined not only to my Father, but to yourselves also, by an indissoluble bond. You must be reminded, however, that he only, who shews a constant desire and endeavour to perform whatever I have commanded, is acknowledged to give a decisive proof of his regard. He is the person who shall obtain unequivocal marks of my Father's favour, as well as of my warmest attachment, and who, likewise, shall receive from me a clear discovery of my glorious character."

Judas, one of the twelve, but not the traitor, expressed his astonishment, that such a discovery should be designed for them, and not extended to the world at large. He enquired, how it could be: when Jesus immediately resumed his affectionate address: "The man, who is influenced by a sincere love to me, will necessarily yield an unfeigned submission to my authority:

thority: and, as he will be the object of my Father's complacency and delight, we will together visit him, and take up our residence within him. An enmity of heart, indeed, would lead to an entire rejection of my words: but, as I declare the will of Jehovah, the God of Hosts, every contemptuous unbeliever will be left without excuse. Such are the instructions, which I have delivered, during my personal ministry among you. And now, though I am departing, the Holy Ghost shall be sent to supply my place: he shall give you a clear conception of divine truth, and revive in your memories every doctrine, which you have heard from me."

"Here, then, I take my leave, with a declaration of my best wishes for you. Peace, the most valuable blessing, I bequeath to you: peace, which I have procured by my blood, and which can be communicated only by my grace, I bestow upon you. This is what the world cannot impart: their professions of good will are, in general, empty flatteries and compliments; they confer no real satisfaction; and are extremely changeable. Far different is my solemn benediction, which I pronounce in the sincerity of my heart, which carries an efficacy with it to promote your happiness, and which I will never revoke. On these grounds, your fears may be dispersed, and your minds composed and comforted."

"You will, therefore, receive the most ample benefits from my departure; and on my account, as well as your own, you may be glad at my removal, since I am quitting my present state of humiliation and distress,

trials, and returning to my Father, who is exalted in bliss and glory, far beyond what I possess in this life. I have warned you of the events, which are about to take place, that you may not be staggered by them, but rather confirmed in the faith. I shall not have time to add much more: for I am just entering upon a painful conflict with Satan, who has usurped the dominion of the world. But I dread not his malice, as there is nothing in my nature, which can favour his assaults, or give him an advantage over me. I submit to this opposition, that I may publicly testify my regard to the Father, and my readiness to fulfil all my engagements with him: and now I hasten to do my last work upon earth."

And what do we learn from this affecting discourse? Does it not excite in us the most fervent love to the Saviour? Let us not forget, that he requires obedience, as the test of our love. Do we not perceive the excellence and happiness of his service? Do we not long for the manifestation of the divine favour, which he promises to his faithful people? Surely, it ought to afford us the strongest consolation, that Jesus, who was dead, is alive again, and that he is gone into heaven, to carry on his designs of mercy for us. Nay, he is still ever present with his Church, and pledges himself for the security of every true believer. The light, and strength, and joy of his Spirit, are vouchsafed to all his sincere disciples, even to the end of time: the Comforter will "abide with us for ever." Let us plead with him these gracious declarations: let us implore that peace, which is his own most valuable legacy,
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and request, that, since he hath overcome Satan, he would enable us to sustain the conflict, and bring us off “ more than conquerors,” to the praise of his great name.

After the solemn address, which we have considered, our Lord proposed to retire; but, probably making a pause before he quitted the room, he renewed his exhortations to the Apostles. To shew them the necessity of continual dependence on him, he represented himself and his Church under the similitude of a vine, planted and cultivated by a wise and careful husbandman*. He is the root and stock of the tree, and his professing people are its branches. Some, which are beautifully adorned with leaves, produce no fruit. These are cut off, and consigned to the flames, as fit only to be used for fuel. Such is the state and character of merely nominal Christians, and such will be their final destruction. They are members of the visible Church; their appearances are fair and promising, but their barrenness witnesses against them; and therefore they are “ nigh unto cursing, whose end is to be burned †.”

There are, however, branches of another sort, truly excellent and valuable, which, in consequence of nourishment derived from the root, bear a large increase. Such, our Lord testified, were all the Apostles, after Judas had withdrawn from the company. Such likewise are all true believers: by faith they are joined to the Saviour, and from that union they receive an influence, which renders them, though in different

* John xv. 1, &c.

† Heb. vi. 8.

degrees,

degrees, "fruitful in every good work." To Him, therefore, all their attainments and usefulness are ascribed: left to themselves, or separated from him, they are no more productive of good, than the branches of the vine, when cut off from the stock. But, whilst they maintain a constant regard to Jesus, they preserve their spiritual life, and make advancement in holiness.

Yet even these valuable branches stand in need of being pruned; for, unless the luxuriant parts be taken off, the fruit will degenerate. For this very purpose, therefore, the care of the husbandman is exercised. O what sharp operations does it require, to lop off those excrescences, which shoot forth even from eminent believers! The Lord, who loves them, will not spare them, but appoint the heaviest afflictions, with no other design than to render them more pure, and, of consequence, more honourable and useful members of his Church.

Do we perceive our own character exhibited in this parable? Have we any thing more than an external profession of Christianity? Are we "filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ unto the glory and praise of God *?" Or how do we expect to do good? Is there any other way, than through a vital union with the Saviour? No: he himself declared our utter inability, when he said, "Without me ye can do nothing." Let us confess our weakness, and implore his help. May he attach our hearts to himself, and communicate such supplies of grace,

* Phil. i. 11.

as may enable us to adorn our holy calling! Be it our concern, to maintain our faith, and cultivate an intercourse with him day by day. Yet, even then, severe trials may be necessary for us. Let us not shrink from them, but pray only, that they may accomplish in us the desired effects. How blessed will be the consequences of such an adherence to Christ! We shall be emboldened to approach him with confidence; for he has engaged to answer our petitions. By our consistent and honourable deportment, the God, whom we serve, will be glorified, since it will appear from us, not only that he is "rich in mercy," but that he "loveth righteousness." This also will contribute essentially to our own comfort, as affording the strongest evidence, that we are the disciples of Jesus.

Our Lord, therefore, earnestly pressed upon his Apostles such a practical regard to duty: "As I am the object of my Father's complacency and delight, so do I feel the most affectionate attachment to you. It should be your aim and endeavour to walk in a state of holy intimacy with me; which can be effected only by your ready compliance with all my injunctions, even as I have yielded a constant and universal obedience to the injunctions of my Father. In these exhortations I am the more urgent, that I may receive continual satisfaction from you, and that your happiness in me may be completed."

"One commandment, in particular, I again enforce upon you; which is, that you bear the most fervent love one towards another. In this, you have only to imitate

tate that kindness, which I have shewn to you. No higher instance of benevolence can be produced, than a man's offering up himself to die on behalf of his friends. As my friends I shall regard you, while you pay a due deference to my authority, and obey my precepts. I treat you not as inferior domestics, who are to be kept at a distance, but as the partners of my counsels, to whom I have communicated whatever I have received in charge from my Father. To this honourable situation you have been called, not by your previous choice of me, but by my free and sovereign mercy towards you : and I have appointed you to your sacred function, that you may be extensively useful, and that the benefits of your ministry may reach through many generations. Such also are my gracious engagements with you, that you may expect an answer to your largest petitions in my name. I require only, that you shew your gratitude and obedience, by maintaining a mutual and ardent affection for one another."

And is it of no concern to us, what the Saviour pressed upon his Apostles ? Were they strictly enjoined to continue in the love of their Master ; and are we at liberty to neglect and despise him ? Should not his unparalleled kindness in dying for us, as well as for them, excite us to admire, and praise, and serve him ? We had deserved the divine indignation and wrath ; but, by virtue of his oblation, we may now be admitted to the most honourable privileges. We also, like the Apostles, are received into a state of holy friendship with our Lord, if indeed we believe in his name ; and

to us he condescends to make known the mysteries of his kingdom. Surely, we shall not hesitate to say, The Lord hath done it, not for our righteousness, but of his own abundant grace. Yet we should remember, that the end of our election and separation from the world, is, that we may produce the fruits of righteousness. Is this our aim and desire? To instance in the particular duty, so much insisted on; do we possess and cultivate brotherly love? If otherwise, where is our religion; where our knowledge, and imitation of Christ? Can it be allowable for us, any more than for the first Christians, to "bite and devour one another?" You, therefore, who "have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth *," for you are strangers to the power of the Gospel.

Jesus proceeded in his exhortation to his Apostles, that he might prepare them for the opposition, which awaited them: "However unexceptionable and benevolent your spirit and conduct may be, you need not wonder, if you be marked out as objects of general detestation; since you have seen me treated in the same manner. If, indeed, you were conformed to the principles and practices of the world, you might conciliate their favour; but, as you differ from them so widely, in consequence of your being separated by my grace, you will excite their disgust. Still you should not complain, but be satisfied, when you recollect, that you meet with no worse reception than

* James iii. 14.

your great Master did. Persecutions will be raised against you on my account, through an ignorance of God and of his Christ. Be not tempted to comply with your enemies, or envy them their triumph; for their case is deplorably wretched. As I have so long preached amongst them, and confirmed my doctrines with unparalleled miracles, they can set up no plea in their own defence. For now it appears, that in rejecting me they resist the God of heaven, who hath borne his testimony to me. Yet, even by this unreasonable and base opposition, they fulfil their own scriptures, which have foretold it *."

" My cause, however, shall prosper, notwithstanding the violence of adversaries. The abundant effusion of the Spirit, whom I will send down from the Father, upon my return to him, shall afford the most convincing evidence of the truth of the Gospel. You also, my chosen witnesses, whom I have trained up for the ministry, shall be so strengthened and emboldened to preach the faith, that your enemies will be confounded, and multitudes of converts added to my Church."

What influence, then, do we draw from this part of the exhortation? If the religion of Jesus be the same, as in primitive times, may not similar consequences be expected? The external profession, indeed, as it is general among us, exposes no man to contempt: but the life and power of it would still render us unfashionable, and offensive to those, who

* Psal. xxxv. 19.

are governed by the maxims and customs of the world. This is not to be avoided, even by the most prudent and exemplary Christians. The zealous followers of Jesus will be hated, in a measure, as he was, and for that very reason, because they resemble Him. Does this discourage us? Or do we complain of the terms? Are we, then, inclined to join the society of those, who scoff at all serious attention to spiritual things, or, at least, who care not for them? Let us deliberate well. What will the issue be? Would not such a conduct imply a decided opposition to the Saviour? And, considering the instructions and admonitions given us, would not our sin be unpardonable? Let us rather, therefore, meet the frowns of men, than provoke the vengeance of Almighty God.

The promulgation of the Gospel, through the effusion of the Holy Ghost and the labours of the Apostles, has been answerable to the prediction. But are we ourselves brought under its influence? Every true disciple, even now, will be able to bear witness for Christ: what, then, is our testimony concerning him? Can we tell of his power, faithfulness, and love, from our own experience, and recommend his service to all, from what we have known of its blessedness? Attestations of this nature, from private and obscure Christians, might have the happiest effects, in silencing the objections of infidels, and reconciling many to the principles which they despise. May Jesus, our exalted Lord, send down a more abundant measure of his

his Spirit upon us, that his cause may be revived, his Church enlarged, and his people animated with increasing confidence and joy in his ways, to the glory of his own name here and hereafter to all eternity !
Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 38.

Jesus concluded his address to his Apostles, with a prediction of their sufferings, a promise of the Spirit, and an assurance of his own return—offered up a fervent prayer, for himself, his Apostles, and all believers.

WHATEVER the Saviour felt on his own account, in the view of his approaching sufferings, he was most deeply affected, as we have seen, for the distressed state, in which he was about to leave his beloved Apostles. The paschal supper, of which they had been partakers together, was the last meal in which they were to enjoy the communion of the same table, before his death, and afforded the last opportunity for exhortation and counsel. A farewell, at the moment of final separation, is always attended, where the bonds of union in life have been dear and sacred, with peculiar circumstances of solemnity, tenderness, and grief. It was now, that the love of the Saviour broke forth, resembling that which a parent expresses for his children, who are soon to be exposed, as helpless orphans, to extreme calamities and dangers. He proceeded like such a counsellor, to instruct, warn, and comfort them*.

* John xvi. 1.

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“ I have given you, my faithful followers, previous intimations of the formidable opposition, which you will have to encounter, in order that, being prepared, you may not be shaken in your minds, or induced to desert my cause, when you enter upon the sharp conflict. Your enemies will persecute you with a rage so blind and furious, that, while they excommunicate you, and even put you to death, they will consider themselves as performing a religious service, and bringing glory to God. This will arise from their ignorance of the righteous character of my Father, as well as of my peculiar office and dignity. In your deep distresses you will recollect my predictions, and find in them a confirmation of your faith. It was the less necessary to give you these notices before, as I have hitherto been your constant companion, ready to suggest all proper counsel and direction, as circumstances occurred.”

Such was the prophecy of Jesus, and we learn from the history of the Apostles, that it was exactly verified. They, who ought to have been received “ as an Angel of God,” met with general scorn and detestation, as if they were unworthy to live; and many of them suffered death in its most dreadful forms, while their persecutors pleaded a regard to conscience and religion. We read of similar events in other ages of the Church; and at the present day, though violence is restrained and loud professions of candour and liberality are made, it is obvious, that fervent zeal for the honour of our Redeemer would expose us to contempt. And do not many among us, through the fear of difficulties, decline
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those pious exertions, which they acknowledge to be requisite? Or, if we "suffer for righteousness' sake," are we not offended, and almost induced to desert the service? Have we, then, forgotten the declarations of Jesus? Or have they not taught us to expect the enmity of the world, if we would be the friends of God? If real godliness produced no opposition, how would the scriptures be fulfilled? But matter of fact abundantly confirms their truth, and should establish us in the belief and love of the Gospel.

The Apostles were too much oppressed by the intimations of their Lord's departure, to propose any further enquiries upon the subject. But he proceeded to suggest such considerations, as might relieve and comfort them. "However painful my removal may be to you, it is highly requisite on your own account; for you could not otherwise obtain the influences of the Holy Ghost. But now, in consequence of my death, this divine Agent shall descend upon you, and give an amazing efficacy to your ministrations.' By his mighty operations, the world will be convinced of the guilt, which consists in unbelief and rejection of me. He will teach men the nature and sufficiency of my righteousness, from my return to my Father at the completion of my work, and in the overthrow and dethronement of Satan exhibit a proof of the judgment with which I am intrusted."

"Many things yet remain to be more clearly unfolded to you, but for the present, through the erroneous sentiments and strong prejudices which possess your minds, you are indisposed to receive them. The Spirit,

Spirit, who will be your guide and teacher, will effectually dispel the darkness from your minds, and reveal the whole system of divine truth: and his declarations should be regarded as coming with authority from heaven. He will discover future events; but his peculiar office will be to give you clearer and more honourable conceptions of my character and salvation, by exhibiting to your view those glorious perfections, which I possess in the same extent as the Father."

Here let us pause, and contemplate the Saviour's promises, from which we may derive the strongest consolation. However we may be inclined to lament his removal from the earth, we may rejoice in those inestimable benefits, which his death has procured. In particular, the influences of the Spirit are bestowed upon the Church, as the fruit and purchase of his sacrifice. It is allowed, that these influences were communicated to the Apostles in an extraordinary measure, and the peculiar circumstances of their situation rendered them expedient. But the Spirit yet continues to execute his office by his common operations, according to our Lord's description. He it is, who arrests the careless sinner, and fixes upon him a deep conviction of guilt, especially for his contempt of the grace of the Gospel. He gives the knowledge of salvation, by exhibiting to the view of the mind the perfect obedience of Christ. And He also directs the attention to the same exalted Personage, in the character of the Almighty Governor and universal Judge. May these effects accompany the labours of faithful ministers in the present day! For thus only "the
word

word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword *:" thus only will it " have free course and be glorified †."

It was promised to the Apostles, that their ignorance and prejudice should be removed by further degrees of illumination, particularly by larger discoveries of the dignity of the Redeemer, and of the blessings which he bestows. We also stand in need of, and are encouraged to solicit and expect, the same gracious assistance. Have we no mistakes to be corrected, no wrong affections to be subdued? Let us pray, that the Holy Ghost, who is the author of all spiritual light and life, may " guide us into all truth." We look not for infallibility, or the gift of prophecy: but we may offer up the most fervent supplications, " That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, in the knowledge of Him: the eyes of our understanding being enlightened; that we may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints ‡."

Upon our Lord's intimating to his Apostles, that he should soon depart and go to the Father, and return after a short interval, they were at a loss to comprehend his meaning. He declared, therefore, more explicitly, that though distress and anguish were coming upon them, sharp as the pangs of childbirth, yet as these are succeeded by sensations of peculiar delight after a safe delivery, so their grief should be followed by a state of lasting joy, inasmuch as he would visit

* Heb. iv. 12, † 2 Thess. iii. 1. ‡ Eph. i. 17, 18.

them again. Doubtless, he intended to suggest, that by his appearance, upon his resurrection from the dead, he would disperse their fears, establish their hopes and comforts, and render them dauntless under future trials. Yet it is probable, that he had a reference to his final advent, when all his people shall behold his glory. Then, in the highest sense of the words, they shall meet him "with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness; and sorrow and sighing shall flee away*." What strong consolation does this administer to believers! Under your severest calamities, look forwards to your Lord's return, with holy exultation, for "He shall wipe away all tears from your eyes †." If he should thus intimate his intention, "Surely, I come quickly;" it is your privilege to reply, "Amen: even so come, Lord Jesus ‡."

The Saviour reminded his Apostles, that, though his bodily presence should be withdrawn from them, they should be so much more enlightened, as not to stand in need of the same familiar converse with him. Some degree of obscurity rested upon his instructions during his personal continuance among them; but he promised to give them by his Spirit the most explicit declarations of the divine will. He pressed upon them the necessity of prayer, and taught them especially to maintain an entire dependence upon his merits and mediation, in all their addresses to the Father; which they had not, till that time, been instructed to do in so express a manner. He added,

* Isa. xxxv. 10. † Rev. vii. 17. ‡ xxii. 20.

likewise,

likewise, the most gracious assurances, that their petitions, being offered up through faith in his name, would certainly obtain a favourable acceptance, and ensure the completion of their wishes. This efficacy he taught them to ascribe, not only to his intercession, but to the strong affection, which the Father himself bore towards them for their warm and faithful attachment to him. He repeated it, therefore, for their encouragement, that he was then about to return to that high and glorious Personage, whose love for them was the same as his own.

The clear and precious discoveries, which the Saviour promised, the Apostles actually received; and we, at this very day, enjoy the benefits of their illumination. Let us value those authentic records, in which they have unfolded to our view the revelation of divine truth, so wonderfully communicated to them. But let us not forget our need of prayer, and the great advantages attending the right performance of this duty. We, also, are allowed a free access to God in the name of Jesus. Are we making use of the privilege? Are we imploring spiritual blessings with all that fervour, which a full conviction of their value would produce? Do we exercise an unfeigned reliance upon our exalted Intercessor? And can we, through him, approach to God, as to a loving Father, with confidence and joy? This is the temper and conduct, to which a firm belief of the Gospel will infallibly lead.

After these declarations of Jesus, the Apostles professed to have received entire satisfaction, and an
assured

assured persuasion of his high character and divine original. But alas! they were not sufficiently aware of their own weakness. He warned them, that, strong as their faith might seem, the hour was at hand, when they would all be so shaken in their principles as to desert him: yet, notwithstanding their treachery, he rejoiced that he should be supported by virtue of his union with the Father. It is not wrong to declare, what are our views of Christ, and what affections we feel towards him: but the solemn admonition, here given, teaches us not to boast of the clearness of our knowledge or the warmth of our attachment. We may soon be brought into such trials, as may stagger and confound us, and, for a season at least, be "moved away from the hope of the Gospel," as if we had found the whole system a delusion. It will be our wisdom, as well as duty, under a diffidence of ourselves, to rely upon the grace of God, which alone can preserve us, and to pray, "Uphold me according unto thy word, that I may live; and let me not be ashamed of my hope *."

Yet we admire the forbearance and tenderness of Jesus, even in the view of their inconstancy. He did not frown upon them, but encouraged them by an assurance, that, through faith in his name, they should still possess a constant source of peace, and an antidote to the cup of tribulation, which the world would soon give them to drink. And, while he warned them to look for severe opposition and sharp distress from its assaults, he closed his address with ex-

* Psal. cxix. 116.

horting them to maintain a holy cheerfulness and courage, in full dependence upon Him their victorious Leader. It is the will of Jesus, then, that his fainting people should be comforted; and even that those, who have betrayed an unsteadiness in his service, should not despond, but be induced to return, and trust in his love. O, how large are his compassions!

We ask, What are your expectations of happiness? Are you seeking it in present things? Alas! you will be miserably disappointed: Jesus alone can bestow the precious treasure, nor will you ever obtain it, till you be willing to receive it at his hands. You cannot enjoy his favour and that of the world together. If you follow him with fidelity and zeal, you must prepare to meet resistance, and arm yourselves for a severe conflict. He, however, whom you serve, has already overcome your enemies; and you may rejoice in this confidence, that they shall be subdued under your feet, because they are fallen under His. O desert not his standard, and you shall soon share in the honours of his triumph, and sit down with him in his kingdom!

He had concluded his farewell address to his beloved attendants, and was now on the point of departing. But, that no proof might be wanting of his paternal regards, and nothing omitted which could soothe the pangs of separation, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and with fervent intercessions commended to God the Father his adopted children*. John, who was then present, has recorded the prayer; and it remains an

* John xvii, 1, &c.

everlasting monument of the strong and invariable attachment of Christ to his Church, and ensures the Providence, which shall save it from the malice of men and devils. It was also adapted to his own peculiar circumstances, who had but a few hours more to live in the world; and his conduct on that occasion teaches us to wait for our great change in the exercise of ardent devotion. It appears, indeed, as we have observed, to have been dictated by a tender regard to the situation of his Apostles, who, perplexed and tempted as they were, stood in need of all that protection, support, and comfort, which he solicited his Father to grant them. The prayer, however, may likewise be considered, as a pattern of that prevailing intercession which he carries on in heaven, and which he will continue to offer to the end of time, for the benefit of every member of his Church.

There are those, who represent it as inconsistent with the doctrine of his Godhead, that he should ever be a suppliant. But they seem willing to forget that part of the Christian's creed, which maintains, that Jesus was very man as well as very God; that as man he was required "to fulfil all righteousness," and therefore among other duties to perform that of prayer. Besides, in that state of humiliation, being a partaker of our weaknesses, he had occasion to implore assistance from above, even as we ourselves; and he received that assistance in answer to his own petitions. Yet in his remarkable address to Heaven, which we now proceed to consider, he discovers a superior dignity. The language is such, as a mere man cannot adopt;

adopt; it will not suit any other than Him, who is our IMMANUEL, possessed of two natures, "God manifest in the flesh."

He began with a request for himself. He could not be unmindful of his own situation, with which such important events were connected. As he was about to close his work on earth, it was his earnest desire to be so supported, that the conclusion might be truly honourable. The grand, decisive hour was at hand, on which the whole of his mediatorial undertaking depended: anxious, therefore, for the glory of God and the salvation of his people, he prayed, that he might be sustained in the conflict, and crowned with victory. This he solicited and obtained. A divine power attended him in his deepest humiliation: an Angel appeared to strengthen him in the garden; his enemies were struck to the ground; his very judge testified his innocence; the conversion of a dying sinner gave a lustre to his cross; the heavens were darkened, the earth shook, the veil of the temple was rent, and the graves opened, in answer to this request, that the dignity of the Saviour might be attested. Doubtless, he had a view likewise to those subsequent events, his resurrection and ascension, the miraculous effusion of the Spirit, and the efficacious influence of the Gospel: and these also have signally displayed his high character.

He considered himself in possession of universal dominion to be exercised with an especial regard to the salvation of his people, according to the divine Covenant. To this end, it was necessary for them

them to be brought to the knowledge of the true God, and of the scheme of Redemption through the Son. Having invariably pursued the great plan intrusted to him, and being about to perfect his engagements by the sacrifice of himself, he petitioned that he might again be admitted to participate of all that splendour of Deity, which he had enjoyed from everlasting in union with the Father, and of which he had divested himself that he might take up his abode upon earth.—He is now returned to that exalted state, from which he descended: and surely, according to this description, it is meet that we adore him as our Lord and our God. A mere creature, or One raised to be God, as some vainly talk, could not speak thus; since whatever glory he now possesses in heaven, he did possess before there was any creation. The doctrine is mysterious, but we rejoice in it, as laying a firm foundation for our faith and hope.

In this address of Jesus to his Father, he bore upon his heart the case of his dear followers, and especially of his chosen Apostles. He appears, indeed, to have been more solicitous for them, than for himself; so that, even in the mention of his own concerns, he had a view to their benefit. His disciples were his peculiar charge; they had been committed to him by express Covenant; he had gradually trained them up for his service, and faithfully instructed them in the divine will. They, on their part, had believed his declarations, understood his character, and steadfastly attached themselves to his

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cause. This he represented, while he interceded for them, exclusively of others who knew him not. He pleaded, that they were the objects of his Father's peculiar choice and love, as well as of his own. He argued, that in this respect there could be no difference between him and the Father, and that, as they possessed the same perfections, their counsels must accord, and the same persons be equally dear to them both. Being therefore about to depart, he solemnly commended his favoured attendants to the care of his God, and prayed, that, for the honour of his name, they might be preserved from the snares, to which they were exposed, and be knit together by an indissoluble union of affection.

He had watched over them during his residence amongst them, and had kept them in the faith; so that Judas only had apostatized, according to the predictions of the scripture. And now, upon returning to his Father, he offered up these petitions in their presence, that their happiness in him might be confirmed and completed. He observed, that, as they had received his doctrine, and, like him, differed so widely in conduct and spirit from the world, they were generally rejected with abhorrence, and no other treatment could be looked for. He was not solicitous, that they should be immediately taken to heaven, merely to avoid the violence of persecution: he knew, that it was expedient for them to remain longer upon earth; but he prayed most fervently, that they might not be overcome by temptation, or betrayed into dishonourable conduct. He requested, that, while they
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separated from sinners, they might be continually advancing in real holiness, through the powerful energy of divine truth upon their minds. For this purpose he pleaded the importance of their office, as they were his ambassadors, appointed to promote the grand object of his own mission: and he expressed his desire, that, as he devoted himself to his work with a view to their spiritual good, they might receive more abundant grace, and feel the sanctifying influence of that Gospel, which they were about to preach.

What do we learn from all this? Among other things, we cannot but remark the earnest concern of Jesus for the interest of true religion. These his dear servants, so commissioned, obtained a peculiar honour; and to the prevalency of this intercession, not to any natural excellence or superiority in them, we must ascribe their ardent zeal, their unshaken confidence, their exemplary holiness, and amazing success. Let their history, from the day of Pentecost, testify, how fully his prayers were answered. We rejoice that he still sends out ministers, for the enlargement and edification of his Church, that he is solicitous to preserve and bless them by his grace, and gives efficacy to their labours. They should seriously contemplate the character of the Apostles as here stated by their Lord, that they may judge what manner of persons they themselves ought to be. It is expedient for them, doubtless, as it was for the Apostles, to be cordially attached to the Saviour, and to possess an eminent measure of divine knowledge, faith, and holiness;

and it is equally necessary to pray, that they may be kept from the evil of the world, united together in love, and sanctified through the truth, which they preach. Let them, therefore, commend their cause to Jesus, who, as their Advocate in heaven, will plead for them, and they shall receive sufficient grace, as the fruit of his mediation.

But private Christians, as well as ministers, may derive encouragement from this solemn intercession of Jesus. They are all dear to him; nor can he ever be unmindful of their interests. Accordingly, he extended his petitions in behalf of all those, who, in every age and country, should be induced by the doctrine of the Apostles to place their unfeigned reliance upon Him. How important to each of us is this declaration! We are favoured with an authentic account of those truths, which the Apostles taught: but have we been so influenced by their word, as to believe in the Saviour? If it appear, that we possess this faith, then we may conclude, that he pleaded for us, and that "he offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying" on our behalf. Let us carefully remark the blessings, which he has implored, and expect to receive them.

He prayed, that all his people might be joined together as one body, partaking of the same Spirit, and dwelling in the Father and the Son, by a divine and mysterious union, even resembling that which subsists between the persons of the Godhead. This request he urged with peculiar earnestness, observing, that he bestowed his grace upon them with a view

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to that very end, and that their close and affectionate attachment to each other would afford a strong evidence to the world of the truth of his mission, and of the love of God towards them. Are we aware of the importance of maintaining this Christian concord? And do we carefully avoid whatever may prevent or interrupt it? Are peace and harmony among the different members of the Church the most forcible recommendation of our religion? Alas! how much cause we have to lament, that it is exposed to the scorn of infidels, by the bitter contentions, which have so generally prevailed! Or, how can it appear, that we are the objects of the divine complacency, while we are malicious and vindictive? O may the Saviour impart to us a more abundant measure of his Spirit, and thereby unite us to himself and to each other in the bonds of love, to the praise of his own grace, and our unspeakable consolation!

Jesus looked forward to the eternal world, and prayed, not only for the credit of religion, and the happiness of his people in this life, but for the consummation of their bliss and glory in his immediate presence for ever. This he claimed rather than requested, even demanding their final salvation on the ground of the Father's engagements, and everlasting delight in him. Let us contemplate with admiration, gratitude, and joy, the declaration of our Redeemer's will, as here expressed. It may justly inspire us with hope and confidence. If we are believers indeed, we shall behold his glory; for that state of exaltation has been prepared for us from the foundation of the

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world. Such is his counsel of mercy, which shall not be frustrated.

Jesus closed the solemn intercession, by commending to the care of the Father his chosen Apostles, as distinguished from others by their knowledge of his truth; expressing at the same time an earnest desire, that they might continue to be favoured with an abiding sense of the Love of God, and engaging himself to take up his residence within them.—Through the whole of this scene, the Redeemer is exhibited in the most endearing light; and, from the view of his compassion and faithfulness, we may be emboldened to trust ourselves under his care. He is “the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever*.” He, who was so solicitous, for the perseverance and happiness of his ancient disciples, will not forget or neglect the least and meanest of his servants in the present day. To all of them, without exception, he has said, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee †.” Let us rejoice in the fulness of his grace, and long for the promised vision of his glory.

But does the benefit of this intercession extend to every reader? If carnal affections predominate in your hearts, and you feel no cordial attachment to the Saviour, you have “neither part nor lot in this matter.” He said, “I pray not for the world:” and does not that distinction exclude you, remaining as you are? What, then, will you do without his favour? Whatever temporal advantages you may now possess, you cannot inherit his kingdom; but

* Heb. xiii. 8,

† xiii. 5,

if you die in unbelief, you will be driven away with shame and everlasting contempt. As yet, however, he waits to be gracious, and commands the word of salvation to be preached. "Wherefore, as the Holy Ghost saith, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts *."

• Heb. iii. 7, 8. •

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 39.

Jesus retired to Gethsemane—warned his disciples—suffered an extreme agony—was betrayed by Judas—forsaken by the other Apostles—examined before the high priest, condemned, and insulted.

ALL the preceding circumstances in the life of Jesus have been preparatory, and are to be regarded as subservient, to that important event, which we proceed to consider. He came into the world, not merely to teach, or exhibit an example of righteousness, but chiefly to suffer. Now the sharp conflict commences, now the tremendous scene is unfolded to our view. This is not a subject for amusement or curious speculation: it calls for the vigorous exercise of holy and devout affections. While we contemplate the Son of God bowed down under his accumulated trials, let us learn, what our sins required, and what a debt of gratitude we owe. O blessed Jesus, who didst stoop so low and endure so much for our salvation, help us to conceive, as we ought, of our own guilt and wretchedness, and the condescensions of thy love! Impart to us the inestimable benefits, which thou hast procured:

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“ By thine agony and bloody sweat, by thy cross and passion,—Good Lord, deliver us *.”

Jesus, having left the guest chamber, departed from the city with his eleven Apostles towards the mount of Olives †. Upon the road whither, he warned them, that, notwithstanding their professions of regard, they would all desert him in the hour of his extremity. According to an ancient prediction, the Shepherd being smitten, the sheep should be scattered abroad ‡. Still anxious for their encouragement, he assured them, that, though he should be put to death, he would rise again: instead of upbraiding their cowardice and unbelief, he promised to meet them after that event, and appointed a particular place in Galilee, where he would receive them and confirm their faith and love. Behold, how gracious the Lord is to his wavering and backsliding people! “ Though they fall, they shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholdeth them with his hand ||.”

Not sufficiently aware of their own weakness, they could not credit the declaration of their dear Master, and therefore solemnly protested, that they would hazard every thing, even life itself, in a fixed and resolute adherence to Him. Peter, in particular, expressed the strongest abhorrence of the deed: but Jesus, who “ understandeth our thoughts afar off,” told him in reply, that that very night would witness the shaking

* Litany. † Matt. xxvi. 31—56. Mark xiv. 27—52.
 Luke xxii. 39—53. John xviii. 1—12. ‡ Zech. xiii. 7.
 || Psal. xxxvii. 24.

of his confidence, his repeated perjuries, and his disgraceful denial of his Master. How often are we reminded of human depravity! By numerous instances we are instructed to take heed to ourselves, to distrust our hearts, and to seek for a better security from spiritual declension, than a reliance on our own firmness and constancy..

Jesus arrived at his intended place of retirement, a garden called Gethsemane, where he had been accustomed to retreat, and had frequently passed the night in devotion. Here, probably, by prayer and meditation he meant to prepare for the approaching sufferings, of which he had a full view. When we look for uncommon difficulties, we ought to be, in a more especial manner, frequent and fervent in our applications to the throne of grace. If we thus meet our troubles, we may expect to receive all needful support and consolation.

Out of the eleven, who then attended him, our Lord selected three, Peter, James, and John. They had been favoured with the sight of his glorious transfiguration, and were now designed to be witnesses of his deep distress. With them, therefore, he retired to a separate part, and immediately began to feel an inexpressible anguish and terror. Very remarkable are the words of the Evangelists, when they attempt to describe the painful sensations, which then came upon him through an invisible influence. They imply, says the learned Bishop Pearson, that he was "suddenly, upon a present and immediate apprehension, possessed with fear, horror, and amazement, encompassed with grief, and

and overwhelmed with sorrow, pressed down with consternation and dejection of mind, tormented with anxiety and disquietude of spirit*.”

Probably, he discovered inward perplexity and confusion by his countenance. He declared to his three chosen companions, that his soul was beyond measure afflicted, and, as it were, surrounded with the very pains of death, and desired, that they would continue with him in holy watchfulness, and pray for themselves, that they might not be brought into the perilous conflict. He then withdrew to a little distance, that, being quite alone, he might pour out his heart with the greater freedom before God. He kneeled down; he fell upon his face, and requested, that, if it were possible, the extreme distress, by which he was oppressed, might be removed or shortened. He cried out, with expressions of sharpest anguish, and yet of unfeigned submission, “O my Father, if thus thine honour can be secured, and the salvation of thy people accomplished, let the bitter cup, from which my nature shrinks, be taken from me. But I resign myself to thy wise and sovereign will: I decline not the work, in which I am engaged; and, therefore, let thy purposes be fulfilled, whatever I may suffer.”

When he had prayed to this effect, he returned to his three disciples, whom he found asleep. Ah! how unmindful they were of their Lord's affliction, and of the solemn charge, which he had given them! Immediately he roused them with a serious, though gentle,

* Pearson on the Creed, p. 190.

admonition, upbraiding them all, and Peter more especially, for their unwillingness to bear their part with him in holy vigilance, even for so short a season. He likewise repeated his former injunction, that they should be upon their guard, consider their danger, and by fervent supplications draw down strength from heaven, against the hour of severe trial. Do we ask, why they betrayed such a backwardness to this necessary duty? The compassionate Jesus accounted for it, though the reason does not furnish an excuse: "The spirit truly is willing, but the flesh is weak." This clearly shewed the tenderness of his disposition towards them. He uttered no peevish complaints of their unkindness, but acknowledged their cordial attachment, and lamented that their good desires were obstructed by the weariness of their bodies, and the corruption of their nature.

A second time he withdrew, and offered up similar petitions. He declared again his entire submission to the Father's will, and perfect acquiescence with that very appointment, at which the weakness of humanity shuddered. On returning to his disciples, he found them once more overpowered with sleep. This strange stupor called forth a fresh rebuke, which so confounded them, that they had nothing to reply; yet they were not awakened to any lasting attention. Let us be admonished of our own hardness and insensibility to the agonies which purchased our redemption.

The Saviour retired a third time, and prayed as before. On that occasion, it should seem, he was just sinking under the weight of his distress, when an Angel from heaven was commissioned to administer support
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and consolation. Was the struggle, then, immediately concluded? No: his consternation remained, perhaps increased: being in an agony, engaged as it were in sharp conflict, he cried to God with still greater ardour. Such was the intenseness of his soul, that his whole frame was thrown into a violent agitation. He was prostrate in the cold night, yet sweat profusely; nay, the very blood forced its way through the innumerable pores of his body, and fell in large drops upon the ground. Then, as well as at his crucifixion, that prophetic declaration was fulfilled, "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels *."

Where were the disciples of Jesus, in this season of his extreme anguish? An Angel, as we have seen, was sent for his relief; but was there no earthly friend to support his drooping head? No: he had occasion to lament, that he found no comforters. Those, who made the most solemn protestations of regard, were inattentive to his distress. The three most favoured Apostles, though they had been twice before reproofed for their drowsiness, had fallen asleep again. Their grief, indeed, contributed, in some measure, to produce this effect: but, doubtless, they betrayed the weakness and deficiency of their spiritual principles. He returned, repeated his reproof, and intimated, that it was too late to observe his neglected injunction, that the time for watching and prayer was expired, and that he should be immediately delivered into the hands of

wicked men. Then, having recovered from his agony, and not dreading the event, he called upon them to arise, that they might meet the traitor, who was approaching with a band of ruffians to apprehend him.

The whole of this narration fills us with wonder, and at the same time suggests the most important instructions. We cannot but express our surprise at the conduct of the disciples, circumstanced as they were. Doubtless, they were highly blamable, in disregarding their dear Lord, when he requested their peculiar attention, and neglecting his repeated admonitions. But, while we mourn over them, relapsing into the same fault again and again, we are reminded of our own depravity, and taught not to be confident of ourselves, however sincere and earnest we may be in right principles: for, though “the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak.”

Our eyes are more especially fixed upon the Saviour, who, under his unutterable anguish, exhibits a perfect pattern of patience and meekness. Let us learn to suffer with the same disposition. There are infirmities, attached to humanity, which we may feel without sin, so as to shrink under the pressure, or in the prospect, of calamities. We may, therefore, innocently desire the cup to pass from us. But we are instructed from the view of Jesus in the garden, to surrender up ourselves without reserve to the divine disposal, and to consult the glory of God and the salvation of men, rather than our own present ease and comfort. Under the most painful feelings, while we spread our case before the Lord, and entreat his gracious interposition,

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we should possess such an entire resignation, as to be able to say, "Not what I will, but what thou wilt." Have we attained this temper? How far otherwise! Do not our trials draw forth our corruption, and prove that we are very opposite to the mind of Christ? Ah! what pride and petulance, what unbelief and discontent, do we betray in sharp afflictions! We are ready to quarrel with Jehovah for appointing us so arduous a post: we entertain hard thoughts of him, if deliverance be not instantly vouchsafed; and it should seem, from our vehement impatience, that we could wish every consideration to be sacrificed to our own ease and convenience. If this be the case, surely we do not watch and pray: we are not prepared for the conflict, and a defeat may be expected.

It is enquired, What could be the occasion of the Saviour's extreme distress and remarkable agony? There was no visible, external cause of that perplexity and horror, which he discovered. He appears not to have suffered through excessive pain of body: nor ought we to suppose, that he was terrified, merely under the apprehension of approaching dangers, or that he repented of his undertaking. Never did he shew more distinguished courage, or more clearly manifest his desire of saving sinners at any expense to himself. Yet, consistently with this assertion, it may be allowed, that human nature, even in the holy Jesus, might shudder at the prospect of such severe calamities.

It is said, that many martyrs have possessed greater composure and intrepidity of mind, when they were
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meeting death in its most dreadful forms. But the comparison ought not to be admitted, as the circumstances are so widely different. Jesus was afflicted in a way, and from causes, peculiar to himself: nor is it possible, that any other man could endure what was laid upon him. He stood as "the Repairer of the breach," to turn away from us the vengeance of our offended God, interposing himself between us and the stroke of justice. Therefore "it pleased the Lord to bruise him: He hath put him to grief*." In that view, his mind suffered much more than his body, and before he came to the cross he felt inexpressible agonies, not merely in the prospect of his passion, but from the immediate hand of God pressing his spirit. In Gethsemane, then, while we accompany the Saviour bowed down under "the terrors of God," we behold the deep malignity of sin, and perceive, that, if we should answer for our own offences, the burden would be heavier than we could bear.

It should seem, also, that Satan had considerable influence in producing or increasing the distress on this remarkable occasion. Jesus had just before declared, that the malicious adversary was preparing to attack him, and probably the fiend was, then permitted to vent his utmost rage, and make his fiercest onset. But, however he might harass, he could not overcome; and this very conflict turned to his greater confusion. Jesus obtained the victory, and, as "the Captain of our Salvation," is able to deliver those who are tempted.

* Isa. liii. 10.

Only let us follow his standard, and we may exult in the hope of sharing his glorious conquest.

At the close of his agony, Jesus had announced to his disciples the approach of the traitor; and at that instant Judas came upon them with an armed company. This infamous Apostle had previously sold his Master; and as he knew the place of his retirement, he now took the opportunity of conducting a large and mixed multitude of persons, for the express purpose of seizing him by force. Judas went up to address him with that vile hypocrisy, which marked his character, endeavouring to conceal the basest designs under the guise of friendship. Still professing respect and affection, he saluted his Lord, and with a kiss betrayed him into the hands of his enemies.

Was no resistance made, or escape attempted? No: a cutting reproof was given to the traitor, for being the leader in such a business and with such dissimulation; but Jesus fled not from the danger. Though he had a clear view of all his sufferings, he advanced with amazing fortitude towards the very men, who wished to apprehend him. Having declared himself the person, whom they sought, he displayed his majesty through an invisible influence, by which they were instantly confounded, and struck to the ground, in his presence. After so remarkable a proof of his power, it was a signal evidence of their obduracy, to resume and prosecute their scheme. He might have eluded their pursuit; but he cheerfully surrendered himself, insisting only on one condition, that his disciples might be

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dismissed in safety. How kind and tender was his concern for his dear and affectionate attendants even to the last!

Jesus, the high and exalted Personage, whose name is, "King of kings, and Lord of lords," submitted to be taken into custody, and even to be bound. Amazing sight indeed! Those, who accompanied him, proposed to resist: and Peter, with his usual forwardness, actually drew a sword in his Master's defence, and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. This was a hasty and imprudent step, for which Jesus rebuked him, observing, that such means of protection were improper in their case, and generally proved destructive. He added, that, if it had been expedient, he could easily have obtained the assistance of numerous armies of Angels, but that, with a view to fulfil the scriptures, he cheerfully acquiesced in the Father's appointment, though painful to himself.

To prevent the bad effects of Peter's rashness, Jesus immediately exerted his miraculous power, and healed the wounded person. He graciously interfered to allay the resentment of the armed company, and correct the mistake, which might have been fatal to his disciples. He enquired of his enemies, why they came against him with such a formidable force, as they had no reason to expect opposition, and why they had not seized him before, when he gave them the fairest opportunities. But, as he remarked, their malice, which had been restrained, was then let loose upon him, and the infernal spirits were permitted to employ their
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utmost influence: yet their united efforts could prevail no farther than to fulfil the prophecies of scripture.

The sight of Jesus, as a prisoner in the hands of the wicked, was more than any of the Apostles could bear. They were staggered, as if they had been deluded, and terrified, as being left defenceless. Forgetful, therefore, of their late protestations, they all forsook him, and consulted only how they might secure themselves by flight. Oh! the base ingratitude and treachery of their conduct! This defection must have been more painful to Jesus, than all the violence of his opposers. It furnishes, however, some useful lessons: it teaches us, not to glory in men, not to depend on the firmness of the most eminent characters, nor to confide in any wisdom, strength, or goodness of our own, as sufficient to preserve us in the hour of temptation. May God of his mercy keep us from falling; or else "the fiery trial," which may possibly come upon us, will prove our weakness in a still more awful manner! They neglected to improve the season of retirement allowed them; and from the same causes, indulgence of sloth, and omission of watchfulness and prayer, many have forsaken and dishonoured Christ. How forcible an argument for attention to duty!

But, turning our eyes to Jesus, we behold an inexpressible majesty and meekness in his deportment. The splendour of his divinity broke forth, even in this low state of meanness and abasement. His power and grace were both wonderfully exhibited; and, in the union of the two, the security of our salvation consists. The Redeemer stood alone, being deserted of all his ad-

herents, even those who had seemed most faithful, and who had vowed that they would die with him. Yet he expressed no resentment; nor did he, in any measure, depart from his purpose. He went through his work "in the greatness of his strength," actuated by an ardent desire to accomplish the will of God, and make reconciliation for his people, whatever he might endure. O look unto Jesus, and consider, for what ends this amazing transaction was designed! Do you not feel a cordial regard to him for his voluntary submission to so much contempt and suffering? Does it not confirm your hope, and inspire you with an expectation of pardon, peace, and heaven?

Jesus was hurried away, as a criminal, from Gethsemane to Jerusalem, and there dragged from one part of the city to another. He was taken first to the house of Annas, and then to the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest, where, it should seem, though in the dead of night, the principal members of the Sanhedrim were assembled, waiting to receive their prisoner*. Here he underwent an examination before his malicious and enraged enemies. They questioned him concerning his followers and doctrine. He meekly replied, that he had said nothing in a covert manner, and appealed to those, who had heard his instructions, as the proper witnesses to be interrogated on the subject. For this gentle answer he received a blow, accompanied with marks of disdain, from an officer, who stood near

* Matt. xxvi. 57, &c. Mark xiv. 53, &c. Luke xxii. 54, &c. John xviii. 13-27.

him. It is no slight provocation for an innocent person, when unjustly apprehended and brought to trial, to meet with indignities from the guard, who attends him, or the inferior ministers of justice. Jesus, however, with astonishing patience, sought no vindication, but desired only to know, whether what he had spoken deserved such treatment.

The holy Jesus was arraigned: but what accusation was brought against him? Pains were taken to furnish, if possible, the least shadow of a charge, on which his condemnation might be grounded. Rewards were offered to any who would perjure themselves, and deliver such a testimony, as might afford his judges a plausible pretext for putting him to death; a measure, on which they had determined. But persons of that description, and whose aid seemed necessary, could not readily be found. So strong a restraint does God impose upon the minds even of the dissolute and abandoned, that they are afraid to affirm, what their inclinations would dictate. Were not this the case, there would be but poor security in society either for property or life: and the righteous especially would be so attacked by the lying tongue, that they could no longer maintain their place in the world.

At length two witnesses arose, who gave in some incoherent accounts and gross misrepresentations of what Jesus had said above three years before, concerning the destruction and rebuilding of the temple*. Weak and absurd as the charge was, his enemies endeavoured to

* John ii. 19.

make it of consequence. On this ground they determined to try their prisoner, and accordingly, at the approach of day, they removed him to the grand chamber of the Sanhedrim, where they sat in full council, and put him upon his defence. He, however, replied not to the accusation. "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth*." They were surprised at his silence; but he still refused to enter on his vindication, knowing that it could answer no purpose before those, who had resolved to destroy him.

The high priest then required him, by the most solemn form of adjuration, to declare upon oath, whether he was indeed the promised Messiah. Immediately he replied in the most explicit terms, that he was, and maintained, that, notwithstanding his mean appearance and their contempt of him, they should one day behold him in a state of the highest exaltation and glory, descending from heaven with divine majesty, as the supreme and universal Judge. This bold and open avowal of his character incensed them the more. They considered him as guilty of the most shocking impiety, in claiming so high a dignity, and agreed that he ought to suffer death as a blasphemer.

Did no one, then, arise to plead his cause, and wipe off the aspersions? No: the opportunity, generally allowed to criminals, of producing any favourable

* Isa. liii. 7.

testimonies, was denied to Jesus; a circumstance, which had itself been predicted*. Two of the Sanhedrim dissented from the rest; but it does not appear, that they stood forth in his defence †. His own disciples had deserted him. Peter and John, indeed, seemed to have recovered themselves from their flight, but they followed him only at a distance, and dared not to speak in his defence. Nay, Peter, with profane imprecations, denied that he had ever known him.

The trial being ended, fresh insults were offered to Jesus. He was treated by the lowest of the servants with insolent and cruel indignities, mocked, spit upon, buffeted, blindfolded, and beaten on the face; and at the same time the most vile blasphemies were uttered in derision and contempt. In various instances he fulfilled the prophetic description: He was “a reproach of men, and despised of the people;”—“he hid not his face from shame and spitting ‡.” How wonderful were his condescension and meekness, how detestable the injustice and malevolence of his persecutors!

* Isa. liii. 8. “By an oppressive judgment he was taken off;
“And his manner of life who would declare?”

Bp. Lowth on this passage observes, that no one was punished for a capital crime, till proclamation had been made before the prisoner, allowing those, who knew him, to give evidence in his favour. But in the trial and condemnation of Jesus the usual rule was not observed: no proclamation was made for any person to bear witness to his innocence, nor did any one voluntarily step forth to give such an attestation.

† Luke xxiii. 50, 51. John xix. 38, 39.

‡ Psal. xxii. 6. Isa. l. 6.

What is the treatment, which the Saviour receives from us? It is generally allowed, that the conduct of the Jews was wrong; but is our's defensible? It is possible, that we may inveigh loudly and bitterly against their iniquitous proceedings, and yet be actuated by similar dispositions. This, at least, we know; neglect and hatred of Christ prevail among ourselves. "He is despised and rejected of men*." There are those who turn away from him with disdain, and refuse to hear his character and truth vindicated. There are those, likewise, who seek for objections, and vent their rage in profane and blasphemous speeches against him. All such we warn and exhort. O consider, whom you scorn and oppose! It is no other, than "the Christ, the Son of the blessed God." And will you take part with his enemies? What, then, can you expect the consequence to be? He does not, indeed, instantly confound you, but for the present allows you to triumph, and shew what is in your hearts. Yet "hereafter you shall see him sitting on the right hand of the power of God, and coming in the clouds of heaven." You must stand at his bar, answer for your insolent contempt of his Gospel, and receive your final sentence from his mouth. O turn to him now, while he waits to be gracious, that you may have confidence and joy before him, at the great day of his appearing! Amen.

* Isa, liii. 3.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 40.

Jesus was examined before Pontius Pilate and Herod, scourged, derided, condemned, and crucified.

WE are now called to behold the most stupendous and distressful sight ever exhibited: the highest greatness in the lowest state of abasement; perfect innocence overwhelmed with extreme suffering; the most transcendent excellence treated with general contempt and abhorrence. It is Jesus, "the Lord of glory," who was crucified for us men and for our salvation. "The holy One of God" submitted to be ranked with infamous malefactors, to endure excruciating tortures, and to be cut off by a violent death, as unworthy to live. This is a sight, which Angels, probably, viewed with astonishment. To Satan the transaction might seem to furnish matter of exultation for the moment; but it will certainly turn to his entire and everlasting confusion. With what affections shall we regard it? A serious contemplation of the subject will excite in us emotions of godly sorrow and genuine repentance, and inflame our hearts with holy love and zeal. It is not a tragical fiction, designed merely to move the passions, but

but an awful reality, which is of unspeakably greater importance, than any other occurrence in the history of mankind. We shall relate the facts simply as they are recorded, deducing only those practical reflections, which naturally offer themselves to our consideration.

JESUS, we have seen, had been already tried and condemned by the high priest and the grand council of the Sanhedrim. We might have expected, therefore, that they would proceed to stone him, according to their law, and as they had frequently attempted to do in the violence of their rage. But how then would the scriptures have been fulfilled? They foretold, that the Messiah should suffer a particular kind of death, different from that which the Jewish statutes appointed, a death of peculiar ignominy and excessive torture. And it is worthy of remark, that, as the Jews were at this time in subjection to a foreign yoke, and the privilege of inflicting capital punishments was vested in their conquerors, so the code of the Roman power had annexed to the crimes of the basest of mankind the pains of crucifixion. The slave alone was condemned to be suspended on the cross: and to this was the Saviour reserved.

Good Friday,
Or the day
of our Lord's
crucifixion.

Accordingly, in the morning, after all the Sanhedrim had consulted together, by what means they might most effectually accomplish their wishes in the destruction of Jesus, they commanded him again to be bound, conducted him to the judgment-hall of Pontius Pilate, the governor, or vicegerent of the Roman Emperor, and there

there requested the immediate trial of the prisoner *. The Jews themselves, however, under the pretence of a religious scruple, refused to enter the hall, lest they should contract ceremonial uncleanness from a place, which belonged to the Gentiles, and be unfitted for a participation of the sacrifices, offered at the pass-over. Nothing could more strongly mark their hypocrisy. At the very time they were filled with malignant rage, and intent on shedding innocent blood, they were unwilling to omit the outward forms of devotion, and dreaded a ritual defilement. To what purpose, we ask, are men exact in external observances, while the vilest affections maintain an ascendancy in their hearts? Is the Lord God, who trieth the reins, thus to be imposed on by an empty shew, or the mere professions of regard to his service?

Pilate condescended to comply with their scruples, and instituted his examination of the prisoner in the open air. He enquired, therefore, what charge they urged against him; they replied, that he had been convicted before them, as a notorious malefactor. But, not choosing to proceed upon so general a declaration, or solicitous to be rid of the disagreeable business, he desired them to take the matter into their own hands, and manage the prosecution according to their law. They pleaded, however, that they could not inflict a capital punishment, without his express warrant. They said, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death;" confessing on this occasion with readiness,

* Matt. xxvii. 1, 2, 11—23. Mark xv. 1—14. Luke xxiii. 1—23. John xviii. 28, &c,

what they were generally unwilling to do, their subjection to the Roman power. But all these circumstances were so ordered, that the scriptures might have their completion, by the particular mode in which Jesus suffered. The Lord God Omnipotent reigneth, and renders all events subservient to his own purposes.

To incense the Romans against the prisoner, the Jews alleged, that he had been guilty of seditious practices, having opposed the payment of the Emperor's tribute, and claimed regal honours to himself. Many other charges they preferred, endeavouring to traduce his character by the basest insinuations. To all these he made no reply, being content to bear reproach for our sakes: and his patient silence struck even Pilate with astonishment.

The governor then returned into the hall, and examined him more privately respecting those treasonable designs, of which he was accused. Jesus argued, that the peaceable deportment of himself and his followers sufficiently proved, that he aimed not at temporal dominion: yet he maintained, that he came into the world on purpose to establish another sort of kingdom, and concluded with a solemn admonition to his judge, to attend to the important truth, which he then witnessed before him. Pilate, probably being affected with this declaration, put the question, "What is truth?" but he waited not, perhaps wished not, for an answer. Ah! how many begin, but soon give up, the momentous enquiry, being drawn aside to some other

other object, before they obtain any satisfactory information.

Pilate, however, being convinced of the innocence of Jesus, went out again, and bore an honourable testimony in his favour before his accusers, asserting, that he had found no fault in him. But this very attestation enraged them the more; and immediately, with still greater vehemence, they charged him as the author of tumult and sedition throughout the country, from Galilee to Jerusalem. From the mention of Galilee, it appeared, that the prisoner properly belonged to the jurisdiction of Herod, the tetrarch of that district, who was then at Jerusalem: accordingly, Pilate referred the matter to his decision, desirous to gain his favour, and to relieve himself from trouble.

Herod was the man, who had beheaded the Baptist. He rejoiced to see Jesus, probably from the motive of mere curiosity, as he had heard so much of this famous worker of miracles. Here, also, Jesus underwent a trial; but to the many questions, which the king proposed, he made no reply. The Jewish doctors, in their great zeal, followed him, and urged their malicious accusations: yet no proofs of guilt were produced. Herod and his soldiers treated him with the utmost scorn, as a poor contemptible creature, unworthy of any notice: having clothed him with some splendid vestment, in derision of his pretensions to royalty, he sent him back again to Pilate.

Was the matter, then, determined? No: further insults and cruelties were still in reserve. Had the Roman governor been upright, he would instantly have dismissed

dismissed the prisoner. He was convinced of his innocence, and the more so from Herod's examination. Having, therefore, again summoned his opponents, he declared his belief, that their charges were groundless, and proposed to release him, though not without scourging. Probably, he thought that a slight kind of punishment would pacify their minds, and that something must be conceded to their rage. Through the whole of his conduct you observe the character of a mean, time-serving man, resisting and at last stifling the dictates of his conscience, merely to conciliate the Jews, whom he had incensed by his former austerities. If, as he declared, he found no fault in the person accused, why did he not firmly maintain his cause against his malevolent persecutors? And especially, why did he offer to chastise an innocent man? It was a decisive proof of his want of integrity that he had not courage to act agreeably to his own convictions.

At the passover, the people were usually gratified by the Roman governor with the discharge of some one prisoner, whom they desired. Pilate, therefore, requested, that Jesus might be set at liberty on that occasion. But Barabbas, a robber and a murderer, was preferred before the Saviour and the Prince of life. Three times together the whole body of the populace, urged on by their rulers, with great vehemence opposed his release, and cried out, "Away with him, crucify him, crucify him." To these tumultuous clamours, after some faint resistance, the weak, the unrighteous judge submitted, probably considering it as a matter of necessity, that their
rage

rage must be appeased, even by the sacrifice of the guiltless.

Yet sentence was not immediately pronounced. Pilate still endeavoured to save the life of Jesus, and, it is supposed, with that view proceeded to scourge him, hoping that his enemies would then be satisfied, and no further acts of violence called for*. This, of itself, was a vile indignity; but more ignominious usage and far greater cruelties succeeded. The Roman soldiers concluded that he was now delivered into their power, and began to treat him with insolent contempt, as if he were an object for sport. They derided his claims of majesty, and clothed him with purple and scarlet; they crowned him with thorns, (which pierced into his temples and occasioned extreme anguish) put a reed into his right hand, in resemblance of a sceptre, and then with bended knees paid their homage to him, as king of the Jews. Nor did their scornful abuses stop here. With shameless wantonness and barbarity, they spit upon him, and smote him on the head, that his crown of thorns might give him more excruciating pain.

Even this did not suffice. Pilate brought him forth again before the people, bearing the marks of that contempt and cruelty, with which he had been treated, arrayed in mock majesty, and having his face defiled and covered with blood. Probably, he supposed, that their compassion might at length be excited; and therefore having once more declared, that Jesus had not been convicted of any guilt, he exclaimed, "Behold the

* Matt. xxvii. 24—31. Mark xv. 15—20. Luke xxii. 24, 25. John xix. 1—16.

man." As if he had said, "While you view the wretchedness of the prisoner, upon whom no fault is proved, let your resentment be appeased, and all further persecution cease." But, to prevent lenient measures, their very teachers and leaders cried out with the same acrimonious spirit as before, "Crucify him, crucify him." In vain did the judge continue to assert his innocence: they now varied their accusation, and insisted that he ought to die as a blasphemer, because he had claimed divine perfections, in maintaining that he was the Son of God. This gave a fresh alarm to Pilate, who therefore withdrew from the multitude, and demanded of Jesus, what was his original. Our Lord, however, refused to answer the enquiries of a man, who would not act according to his conscience. This silence the governor considered as a contempt of his authority: but he was then reminded, that his boasted power to save or to destroy was to be ascribed to a peculiar permission of Providence, and that he, though guilty, was less culpable than the promoters of the iniquitous persecution.

Pilate, being now more than ever convinced of the prisoner's innocence, endeavoured to obtain his discharge. But fresh and stronger accusations were urged, and he himself was threatened, as being a traitor, an enemy to Cæsar, if he should acquit the person, who claimed regal honours. Intimidated by such a representation, he placed himself on the seat of judgment, and prepared to pass the solemn sentence. Yet, probably in derision of those fears, which the Jews seemed to entertain for the established government from such an opponent, he brought him forth again,

again, and cried, "Behold your king!" They rejected him, as before, with expressions of the utmost disdain, and demanded his crucifixion.

What, then, remained to be done? Pilate found that all his endeavours to quiet the rage of the people were ineffectual; and, as he was determined to gratify them at any rate, he consented to the death of Jesus. But how shall his own conscience be pacified? As a wretched expedient for the removal of his scruples, he washed his hands in the presence of the multitude, declaring in a solemn manner, that they, and not he, must answer for the blood of this innocent person, whom they forced him to condemn. Unhappy Pilate! how much better would it have been for thee to have maintained a firm and inviolable regard to righteousness and justice, and consulted thy own convictions, rather than the clamours of a mob! What availed thy temporizing schemes! They betrayed the baseness of thy character, increased thy guilt, and hastened thy destruction*.

The case of the Jews was still more deplorable. Determined to hazard every consequence, if only their resentment might be gratified by the death of Jesus, they replied, "His blood be on us, and on our children." Thus they entailed the divine curse upon themselves and their posterity, for the murder of the Son of God. And we know, that the vengeance of heaven has fallen in a remarkable manner upon that

* Pilate was soon afterwards deposed from his government, through the accusations of the Jews, whom he had so studied to please: and it is said, that he perished miserably, by his own hands.

miserable people, and continues to pursue them to this day, for the part they took in that horrid transaction.

At length the unrighteous judge pronounced the awful sentence, that the holy Jesus, whom he had repeatedly declared to be a blameless character, should be delivered to the will of the enraged multitude, to expire under the very severe tortures of crucifixion.

Here let us pause, that we may indulge our serious meditations on the whole of this amazing transaction. "Consider Him, that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself*." Recollect the high dignity of the sufferer, and the cause of his voluntary humiliation; and then every circumstance, here related, will excite your devout astonishment. While you view with terror the obstinate and malignant rage of his enemies, you will admire and praise the condescensions of his love. Fix your regard upon him in this state of deep abasement. "Behold the man!" He is indeed "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief†;" yet he is no other than "the man, who is the fellow of the Lord of hosts‡." He submitted to be an object of sport and derision to those, who were the creatures of his hands. He endured the vilest indignities from them, when he might have consigned them to destruction. He stood with silence and forbearance before his accusers, and resisted not the violence of such as buffeted and scourged him. We are ready to wonder, that he did not strike dumb the tongue of the slanderer and busy mocker, and that he did not unnerve the injurious arm, that was lifted up against

* Heb. xii. 3. † Isa. liii. 3. ‡ Zech. xiii. 7.

him. But we learn from him "to take it patiently," whenever "for conscience toward God we endure grief, suffering wrongfully;" "because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow his steps: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again: when he suffered, he threatened not, but committed himself to Him, that judgeth righteously*."

In all these various circumstances, likewise, we mark the exact completion of ancient prophecies. Thus Messiah speaks, "The mouth of the wicked, and the mouth of the deceitful are opened against me: they have spoken against me with a lying tongue. They compassed me about also with words of hatred; and fought against me without a cause†." "But I, as a deaf man, heard not; and I was as a dumb man, that openeth not his mouth‡." "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting§." We are, therefore, to regard the divine purpose in these minute events. The Jews and Romans, while they were left to the influence of their own passions, became the instruments of accomplishing the scriptures and the decrees of God. Thus the Apostles interpreted the matter, when they said, "Of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done||." Such a view of

* 1 Pet. ii. 19—23. † Psal. cix. 2, 3. ‡ Psal. xxxviii. 13.

§ Isa. l. 6. || Acts iv. 27, 28.

the government of God, as overruling even the vilest designs of his enemies for his own glory, may tend to give us composure, confidence, and joy, under the darkest dispensations.

The promoters of this malicious prosecution carried their point, and triumphed in the victory. The very sentence was passed, which they had so eagerly desired: and immediately, after some fresh insults offered to the prisoner, they proceeded to the execution *. A cross, the instrument of torture and death, was prepared, and, part of the cumbrous load being laid upon him, he was compelled to bear it, so long as his fainting body could support the burden. Thus oppressed, he was led forth through the streets of the city towards Golgotha, that, according to the typical representations of the Jewish sacrifices, he might “suffer without the gate †.”

What an awful procession was this! Jesus, the Son of God and the Saviour of men, whose whole life had been spent in works of mercy, conducted, amidst the general execrations of the people, as an atrocious criminal, “appointed to die!” Did not his opposers relent at the sight of his misery? The most notorious offenders in our country, when cut off from society by the sentence of the law, are pitied and prayed for by the surrounding multitudes. There are few spectators, on such an occasion, whose cheeks are not bedewed with tears of compassion. But Jesus was treated with insult and disdain, even in this last tremendous scene.

* Mat. xxvii. 31—35. Mar. xv. 20—24. Luke xxiii. 26—33. John xix. 16—18. † Heb. xiii. 11, 12.

At length he was relieved from the pressure of his burden, probably because he fainted. His attendants, not from kindness, but to preserve his life for public execution, compelled Simon a Cyrenæan, whom they met by the way, and perhaps suspected of being a disciple, to bear the cross in his stead.

Immense crowds of people joined the procession, and among the rest were some females, who, being deeply affected by the view of his sufferings, dared to express their tender commiseration. To them the loving Saviour looked with kind regard, and, declaring his own readiness to endure the utmost extremity, exhorted them to reserve their tears for other purposes, and bewail the miseries, which were then about to fall upon themselves, their families, and their devoted country. He predicted, that such would be the general desolation of the land, and such the distresses of mothers for their children, that barrenness would be accounted a peculiar happiness, and that his exulting enemies would shortly be so oppressed by terror and despair, as to long for an immediate dissolution, even by the most violent means. He added, that, considering the difference of their character from his, they could not look for the supports, which he experienced, and that they were as dry fuel prepared for the burning. How solemn the admonition! And how needful is it still to weep for the multitudes, who remain in avowed opposition to Christ! Miseries, inconceivably more dreadful than any temporal calamities, are coming upon them; so that, in the horror of their souls, they will wish for utter annihilation, and say to the mountains

and rocks, " Fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand *?"

Having arrived at the appointed place, they offered him a cup to drink, not to alleviate but increase his distress. It was a bitter potion; and he refused it. Some have supposed that a different draught of a pleasant and generous cordial was prepared by his friends; and that, as he did not wish for any mitigation of his pain, he would not avail himself of their kindness.

The execution immediately followed. His hands being stretched out upon the transverse beam, and his feet fixed to the upright part of the cross, those tender and sensible members of the body were pierced through and nailed to the wood. The cross was then erected and fastened in the ground; and the holy sufferer remained suspended in extreme anguish. Such was the situation of Jesus, when he " made his soul an offering for sin."

And here, while we pause, that we may indulge our devout meditations, the enquiry almost forces itself upon us, Why was all this permitted? We are lost in wonder: yet, mysterious as the plan may be, God fulfilled his own purposes in the whole of this singular transaction. Thus it had been determined in the counsels of infinite wisdom; and therefore " thus it behoved Christ to suffer." The scriptures of the old testament had predicted the grand event with all its

* Rev. vi. 16, 17.

various circumstances: and it could not be otherwise, but that every type and prophecy must have its full accomplishment.

It seemed unlikely, that Jesus should die by crucifixion, because this was a Roman not a Jewish punishment; and it might have been expected, from the fury of the people, that they would have dispatched him suddenly, without waiting for a formal trial or judicial process. But, amidst all the commotions which may arise from human machinations, "the Lord reigneth," and "the wrath of man shall praise him *." While the enemies of Jesus followed their own devices, their passions were over-ruled, in order that the great Antitype might answer to all the ancient figures, by the manner of his death.

Isaac was directed to be offered as an oblation to God, and himself carried the wood, which was designed to consume his body: and thus he represented the Redeemer, the appointed victim for the expiation of our guilt, bearing his cross to Calvary. By the paschal lamb intimation had been given to the Church for many preceding ages, that "the Lamb of God" should be slain to take away the sins of the world, and yet be so remarkably preserved by the divine providence, even in his extreme sufferings, that not a bone should be broken †. The cross of Christ, as the means of our deliverance, was still more clearly exhibited by the brazen serpent, lifted up on a pole for the cure of the wounded

* Psal. lxxvi. 10. † Exod. xii. 46. John xix. 36.

Israelites in the wilderness *. From the history before us it appears, that each of these signs has received an exact completion.

Some express predictions, also, rendered this particular kind of death expedient and necessary. Thus the Messiah speaks by David, "They pierced my hands and my feet †;" and by Zechariah, "They shall look upon me whom they have pierced ‡." The **PIERCING** of the body, especially in the parts here specified, evidently denoted crucifixion. Now, suppose for a moment, that Jesus had suffered in any other way, these prophecies would have failed, and he himself been found an impostor and deceiver; for he had declared, that he should be delivered to the Gentiles, to be mocked, and scourged, and **CRUCIFIED** §.

But, in contemplating this subject, let us not rest in speculation. If "before our eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among us," we ought to be filled with admiration of his grace, with gratitude, love, and zeal. To behold such a sight even with indifference, betrays a lamentable stupor of the mind, and an alienation of the soul from the life of God. A proper view of the Saviour "suffering for sins, the just for the unjust," will command our attention, and inspire us with all holy affections. If we understand the nature and value of the object here proposed, the whole world, with all its boasted enjoyments, will appear little in our esti-

* John iii. 14, 15. † Psal. xxii. 16. ‡ Zech. xiii. 10.
§ Matt. xx, 19.

mation. We shall determine to know nothing, and glory in nothing, but Jesus Christ, and him crucified*. We shall perceive sin to be "exceeding sinful," resolve that "our old man" and all his corrupt members shall be mortified^o with Christ, and dread the thought of "crucifying the Son of God afresh, and putting him to an open shame." The cross, when apprehended by faith, will appear to contain a complete remedy for the necessities of our guilty souls; and while, through this expedient, we approach to God with confidence and joy, we shall burn with eager desire, that the blessed mystery may be proclaimed throughout the earth, and sinners of every description persuaded "to confess the faith of Christ crucified †." We shall feel our obligations more forcibly than words can express, and our constant enquiry will be, "What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits ‡?"

Has the subject produced in us such effects as these? It is allowed, that even sincere and eminent believers are shamefully defective in love to the Redeemer. But, we fear, there are thousands among us, who have never been brought under the influence of this divine principle. "The preaching of the cross" is to some "a stumbling block," and to others "foolishness §." Through ignorance, pride, and unbelief, they presumptuously cavil at and deride it; but may we thankfully and joyfully receive it, as bringing the highest glory to God, no less than complete

* 1 Cor. ii. 2. Gal vi. 14. † Office of baptism. ‡ Psal. cxvi. 12. § 1 Cor. i. 23.

salvation to man! May it be made effectual to subdue in us all haughtiness of spirit, the love of sin and of the world! May it establish us in peace and confidence toward God, and give us the victory over death! Then, having gained an admission into heaven, we shall sing for ever, "Worthy is the Lamb, that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by his own blood." Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 41.

Jesus, hanging on the cross, prayed for his murderers—was reviled—comforted the penitent thief—complained of desertion—expired—was pierced—taken down and buried.

THE glory of the Saviour broke forth at various times throughout his humiliation, to the astonishment of many beholders. Even at the last, his dignity, when most obscured, was illustriously displayed. There were certain circumstances, attending his deepest abasement, which in a peculiar manner command our reverence, and conciliate our esteem. While these are proposed to our serious contemplation, we shall look beyond the meanness of his appearance, and, perceiving the real excellency of his character, we shall be constrained to admire, love, and praise him.

We have already accompanied our Lord to Calvary, where his sacred body was stretched out with extreme anguish, pierced in its tenderest parts, fastened to the wood, and exhibited as a spectacle of infamy and contempt to all the people. We now return

to

to the painful, though most instructive, fight, and follow him in our meditations from the cross to the grave. May we be made conformable to him in his sufferings, and “our old man be crucified with him, that the body of sin may be destroyed *!” As “by thy cross and passion,” so “by thy precious death and burial, Good Lord, deliver us †!”.

If we advert to the circumstances of his crucifixion, what do we behold in the conduct of his enemies, but insatiable rage and cruelty? What do we see in him, but unexampled meekness, patience, and compassion? He offered no resistance to their violence, but calmly resigned himself, “as a lamb to the slaughter ‡.” He was solicitous for the salvation of his murderers, rather than for his own personal ease and deliverance. While he commended them to the divine mercy, he manifested the riches of his grace. Even in his dying moments, “he made intercession for the transgressors §.” He said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do ||.”

What an eminent pattern is this! He not only taught, but practised, gentleness, forbearance, and love to the most malicious persecutors: he poured out his heart in fervent supplication for them. He had frequently discovered the same disposition on former occasions: but no instance can be compared to this. After the vilest indignities put upon him, at the very time when his blood-thirsty enemies were exerting the utmost efforts of their rage, and he was bleeding under their hands, he pitied their blind-

* Rom. vi. 6. † Litany. ‡ Isa. liii. 7. § 12. || Luke xxiii. 34.
ness;

ness; for they understood not the sinfulness and danger of their conduct: he grieved for their miserable state, and prayed that they might not come into final condemnation. How few even attempt to imitate the bright example! It must, however, be allowed, that the proud, the implacable; and revengeful, who constitute a numerous company, bear no resemblance to Jesus.

Here the Redeemer has afforded us a representation of his gracious intercession in behalf of sinners: as Mediator between God and man, he is continually offering up a similar petition in heaven. There may be those, who shew the most decided and contemptuous opposition both to him and his people, for whom he pleads the merit of his blood as an adequate atonement, and may still be considered as speaking to the same effect, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

The soldiers, who nailed him to the cross, having stripped him of his garments, divided them among themselves*; yet even in that division their minds were so overruled by a divine influence, that they fulfilled an express prophecy, and gave further evidence, that Jesus was indeed the Christ. For thus had Messiah spoken by David his progenitor, "They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture †." After this, they continued to watch him, that none might attempt a rescue.

Probably with the view of exposing him to ridicule,

* Matt. xxvii. 35—44. Mar xv. 24—32. Lu. xxiii. 34—43. John xix. 19—24. † Psal. xxii. 18.

an inscription, in the three languages generally used and understood, was fixed over his head, deriding his claims of majesty: "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." The chief priests, indeed, were disgusted, that they should be represented as the subjects of so contemptible a king, and petitioned that the writing might be altered. But Pilate refused to comply with their wishes; and that very title, intended to reproach the Saviour, was so ordered under the divine direction, as to express the honourable character and office, which he sustains for the benefit of the true Israel.

Was not the rage of the people at length satiated? Were no tokens of compassion shewn to the holy sufferer? No: quite the contrary. All ranks seemed to unite and vie with each other, while they insulted him by the most scornful and opprobrious speeches. The mob surrounded and reviled him. Even those, who were passing on the road, stopped to amuse themselves with his misery, ridiculed the absurdity of his pretending to be the Son of God and to rebuild the temple, and with virulent abuse called upon him to make good his claims by escaping out of the hands of justice. But shall we wonder at the foolish sneers of a thoughtless multitude, when their superiors set the example? In this case, persons of authority and of the sacred function led the way, and "were chief in the trespass." They laid aside their dignity, and mixed in the tumultuous crowd, that they might promote the general outcry against the Saviour, and deride his helpless situation. As it had
5 been

been alleged that he had saved so many others by miracles, they now, in a disdainful manner, required him to save himself, and promised that they would believe him to be the Christ of God, if he would prove his divine power by coming down from the cross.

How weak, as well as wicked, were these speeches! To have rescued himself, would have been inconsistent with the great design of his incarnation. We rejoice, that, in order to accomplish salvation for others, he would not accept deliverance. It would have been easy for him by one single exertion to have obtained his release; nor would this have exceeded, in strength of evidence, many of those works which he had performed in their presence. Had their presumptuous demands been granted, such were the pride and obstinacy of their hearts, there had still been no hope, that they would have acknowledged him in his proper character. Men are deceived, when they suppose, that some striking appearance or interposition, as an additional proof of revelation, would remove their unbelief. They, who arrogantly reject what is offered, would not be convinced by any demonstration whatever.

The soldiers, also, joined in the same blasphemous reproaches, calling on the Redeemer to assert his pretended royalty by escaping out of their hands; which they foolishly thought impossible. Thus that prophetic declaration was remarkably accomplished; "All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord, that he would deliver him: let him

him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him *." How astonishing, that, in their profane sneers, they applied the very words, and in the exact sense, which had been predicted !.

Two atrocious malefactors were crucified with Jesus: he was placed between them, that he might lie under the greater odium, being exhibited to the public view as a person of the same description. But this circumstance fulfilled the scripture, which said, " He was numbered with the transgressors †." No reproaches, it should seem, were cast upon them; so that he was accounted the vilest of the three. One, at least, of the thieves themselves joined in the general ridicule, and, while dying in his sins, strove to forget his own misery, that he might insult and deride the Saviour. A state of more confirmed and obdurate wickedness is scarcely to be conceived.

But, though in this criminal we lament the extreme degeneracy of our nature, we are called to admire the sovereignty, freeness, and efficacy of divine grace in the pardon and conversion of his fellow sufferer. An astonishing, and, as it should seem, a sudden, change was produced in the man, who appeared equally depraved, and equally near to the brink of destruction. At the latest moment he obtained an assurance of his acceptance and salvation. Possibly, he had never felt real impressions of religion before that awful season, or offered a sincere prayer to God. It is certain, at least, that he was expiring by the hand of justice for his iniquities, and could not plead any pre-

* Psal. xxii. 7, 8.

† Isa. liii. 12.

vious goodness of his own. But at this hour his heart was softened and renewed: he repented, believed, and received the full forgiveness of his sins. Thus one was taken, and another left. Who shall presume to find fault? For who has any claim upon God; or who shall dare to say, that He may not extend his pardoning mercy to what objects, and in what circumstances, He pleases?

Many attempts have been made to obscure the glory of divine grace in the conversion of the dying thief; as if the example were of a dangerous tendency. But, if we attend to it with godly simplicity, we shall find it replete with instruction. It is a striking exhibition of the character of the Saviour, and of the triumph of his cross. It confirms and illustrates the peculiar doctrine of the Gospel, that men are justified in the sight of God, not by their own obedience, but freely through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The case is recorded for the encouragement of those, "who are ready to perish," and stands as an incontestable proof, that none need despair of acceptance, who look unto Jesus, even though life itself be drawing to a close. If any will abuse it, this must be to themselves; and doubtless, by such a conduct, they will aggravate their guilt and condemnation.

The penitence and faith of this malefactor were conspicuous. The grace of God changed and sanctified his heart, while the blood of Christ, then streaming from the cross, expiated all his guilt. He reproved his fellow criminal for his daring contempt

of the Saviour, and warned him to consider his danger: he frankly confessed his own iniquity, and the justice of that sentence by which he suffered: he vindicated the character of Jesus, when there was none to plead his cause: he believed on him for pardon and salvation, in that lowest degree of abasement: he prayed to him as the Lord of life, who was about to take his seat on the throne of glory, and who had heaven itself at his disposal: he said, "Lord, remember me, when thou comest into thy kingdom." Good evidence, then, was given of this dying convert's sincerity; and, though his religion was of a sudden growth, it was solid and vigorous; and, had he been spared, doubtless the most excellent fruits would have been seen in his future obedience. Our gracious Lord listened to his cry, immediately testified his own favourable acceptance, and assured him, that he should be with him, that very day, in an exalted state of purity and happiness.

How rich and extensive is the mercy of our God in Christ! The case before us will furnish us with a strong argument against despair; but let it not be abused, for the purposes of vain confidence and presumption. Though one of these malefactors was, indeed, "a brand plucked out of the fire*," yet it should be remembered, that the other, who appeared equally within reach of salvation, perished for ever. O fear, lest, while Jesus comes nigh to you in the ministry of his word, and many experience its inestimable benefit, you yourselves should be destroyed in unbelief!

* Zech. iii. 2.

The cross was surrounded by an insulting multitude: but there were, also, some friends, and certain pious women especially, who stood near our Lord *. These attracted his notice, in the midst of his sufferings, and as he remarked among them his dear mother, he now paid to her the last tribute of filial duty and affection. Not having worldly possessions to leave, he committed her to the care and protection of John, his beloved disciple, who likewise attended him. How tender the address to her, "Woman, behold thy son!" How honourable the charge to him, "Behold thy mother!"

Whilst Jesus remained on the cross, in a state of extreme torture, a miraculous darkness commenced, about mid-day, which continued for three hours, and extended over the whole land. Such an event must have produced a general consternation; and it was descriptive of the inexpressible horror, which almost overwhelmed the Son of God. How astonishing, on that occasion, the complaint of the holy sufferer! The agony of his mind, it should seem, exceeded the sharpest pains, which he felt from the piercing of his body. The light of his Father's countenance being withdrawn, he lost all inward consolation, and was oppressed, even as in Gethsemane, with anguish and terror beyond conception. In consequence of this, he uttered that loud and bitter cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Yet, strange as the exclamation was, we know it was expressly predicted †.

* Matt. xxvii. 45, &c. Mar. xv. 33, &c. Lu. xxiii. 44, &c. John xix. 25, &c. † Psal. xxii. 1.

It were absurd to ascribe this effect to any groundless apprehensions, weakness, or timidity of spirit, or to seek for any other cause, than the office, which Jesus then sustained as our High Priest, making atonement for our transgressions. We behold, therefore, the deep malignity of sin, in the desertion here spoken of, as well as in every other part of his passion. How great his distress was, we pretend not to calculate. Those, who lie down in absolute despair, or the miserable souls, who are shut up in a state of darkness and horror for ever, can best tell, what it is to be forsaken of God. But, since we are all exposed to the attacks of Satan, and may at any moment be filled with anguish and dismay, under a sense of the divine displeasure, it will be proper to pray, that the great God may not thus leave us to be terrified and confounded, especially at the solemn season of our departure. How suitable is that petition in our burial service, "Spare us, Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and merciful Saviour, thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not at our last hour for any pains of death to fall from thee!"

Did not the expressions of our Lord's distress move the compassion of his enemies? No: they turned his lamentation into ridicule; as if, when he cried, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani," he had been calling for Elijah. It was, therefore, proposed with a contemptuous sneer, that he might wait for that prophet to deliver him. Such were the blindness and obduracy of their hearts! One more prophecy remained to be fulfilled; and, with view to its completion, Jesus exclaimed, "I thirst."

thirst." Let us hear, what the Psalmist wrote of the distress and anguish of his Lord and Antitype, and mark the circumstantial prediction, in which he described a method of insult, and a practice of cruelty, unusual and unheard of. "My strength is dried up like a potsherd: and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death." "They gave me gall for my meat, and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink *." The Gospel narrative proves, that this was exactly fulfilled in the history of the Saviour. When he complained of the burning, feverish heat, with which he was parched through the excess of his anguish, no refreshing draught was offered him, to assuage his pain; but the nauseous potion, which had been foretold, was administered. He was denied the common succour, which is never refused to an enemy in distress: though racked with torture, he was treated with every species of insult.

We hasten to the close of his sufferings, and proceed to consider the manner, in which he expired. Death was not the necessary consequence of crucifixion. He might have come down from the cross, or even retained his life there. No strength or violence of his enemies could have prevailed against his own choice. "No man," said he, "taketh my life from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again †." But it had been appointed and declared from the beginning, that Messiah should redeem the Church by the sacrifice of himself. The typical obla-

* Psal. xxii. 15. lxix. 21.

† John x. 18.

tions as well as various prophecies had given intimations, that "without shedding of blood is no remission*." Jesus, therefore, assumed our nature for this end, that he might die, and "bear our sins in his own body on the tree †."

Anxiously attentive to the completion of the sacred oracles, in all things pertaining to himself, he would not be released from that state of anguish, till he knew that every tittle was fulfilled: and thus he has laid a sure foundation for our hope and comfort. This object being attained, he cried, as if exulting in the great work he had accomplished, "It is finished;"—"all the important purposes of my incarnation are now answered; the glory of God and the salvation of my people are secured; and here I close my sufferings."

His strength was not even then exhausted: his voice, in his last departing words, was as one in full tone and vigour. That he might teach us to leave the world, maintaining faith and joy in God, he said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit;"—"I intrust it to thy care, in cheerful dependence on thy truth and love, and in confident expectation of its re-union with the body." Having thus spoken, he bowed his head, and surrendered the life, which he had the power of retaining. Such a power, indeed, we do not possess. Our breath will be taken from us; whereas he resigned up his. In the act of quitting his abode on earth, as well as during the whole of his continuance here, he yielded a pure and unconstrained obedience to God.

* Heb. ix. 22,

† 1. Pet. ii. 24.

What a momentous event was this! Such as had never before occurred. The Lord God, therefore, that he might glorify his Son Jesus, rendered his departure memorable by a train of miracles, and, as it were, arrested the attention of a careless world. All nature appeared in consternation, when the Lord of nature died. The sun withdrew his light, and thus afforded an emblem that the grand luminary of mankind was removed. The veil of the temple, or the sacred curtain which separated the holy of holies, and forbade the access of common worshippers, was instantly torn asunder, intimating, that the Mosaic dispensation was abolished, that heaven itself was opened, and liberty obtained to approach into the immediate presence of God. The earth shook by a violent convulsion, and the massy rocks were cleft by a supernatural force: and were not these prodigies suited to excite an alarm, on account of the atrocious deed, which had been perpetrated? The neighbouring sepulchres, also, suddenly disclosed their gloomy mansions to the public view: from the graves, then opened, the bodies of many departed saints arose, after the resurrection of Jesus, and appeared in Jerusalem. In such a signal manner it was proclaimed, that our crucified Lord had vanquished death, and ransomed his people from the power of the grave.

Notwithstanding these surprising miracles, many remained thoughtless and obdurate. But there were others of the spectators, whose minds were deeply impressed with grief and terror. The Centurion, especially, who attended with his band of soldiers to guard

the execution, felt and acknowledged a strong conviction, that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. Ah! why does not that conviction force itself upon us all? And why does not this astonishing narration produce in us better and more lasting effects?

The reality of the death of Christ, on which our hopes are grounded, was proved indisputably by his enemies. The Jews, from their pretended regard to the sabbath, which was then approaching, requested of Pilate, that the bodies hanging on the cross might be removed, and that their legs might be broken, for the purpose of dispatching them the sooner. But, Jesus having already expired, that act of violence was not committed upon him. Thus the divine wisdom had appointed, according to the typical representation of the paschal lamb, that a bone of him should not be broken*.

The important fact was further evinced by the brutal rage of one of the soldiers, who struck a spear into his side, and pierced him to the very heart. Had life remained, that wound must have been mortal; for immediately there issued out blood and water, which flowed from the vital parts. This circumstance, on which the Evangelist strongly insists, was not only a proof of the Saviour's death, but an emblem of the blessings, which we derive from that event. He "came by water and blood †;" the water denoting the purifying grace of his Spirit, and the blood the expiation of our guilt. The two must be united, "not water only,

* Exod. xii. 46.

† 1 John v. 6.

but water and blood;" and both are communicated from the crucified Redeemer. You, who perceive your defilement, behold with gratitude and joy the remedy provided. See that stream, which proceeds from the pierced side of Jesus, and pray that you may experience its full efficacy. It is "the fountain opened, for sin and for uncleanness*."

Jesus, then, is "set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood†;" and by this expedient God determined to display his own righteous character, and vindicate the honour of his government. Now it appears, that he is "just," and yet "the justifier of him who believeth in Jesus‡." The atonement, here exhibited, furnishes the awakened penitent with such a plea, as may encourage him to approach to God with confidence and joy§. At the same time it will subdue in his heart the love and power of sin, and teach him to live in all holy obedience||. The cross of Christ, therefore, produces the most blessed consequences, and constitutes the very essence of our religion. Whoever may oppose or deride, it must be continually held up to view; and those, who understand its worth and feel its efficacy, will always contemplate the object with wonder, love, and praise. To them it will ever appear, as "the power of God, and the wisdom of God¶." It will impress their minds with a sense of their high obligations, and excite them to active exertions in the service of God. They will say with the Apostle, "We

* Zech. xiii. 1.

† Rom. iii. 25.

‡ 26.

§ Rom. v. 11.

|| Col. i. 21, 22.

¶ 1 Cor. i. 24.

thus judge, that, if one died for all, then were all dead; and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them*.”

The sequel of the history directs our attention to the lifeless body of our Redeemer. He had been delivered to the Romans to be crucified, and according to their custom, probably, would not have been interred. But how then would the scriptures have been fulfilled? For our Lord himself had predicted, that, by his sepulture “in the heart of the earth,” he should exactly correspond to the type exhibited in Jonas†. The same thing, also, was implied in that declaration of Messiah by the royal Psalmist, “My flesh shall rest in hope‡.” Now, the Jews were the means of giving this additional evidence to the character of Jesus, by petitioning for his burial. Yet, in order to complete a particular prophecy, another difficulty was to be removed. For, if buried at all, why should he not lie with the two thieves, in the place appropriated to the interment of malefactors? This, it should seem, was designed. But Isaiah had foretold, that, though “his grave was appointed with the wicked, with the rich man should be his tomb§.”

Here, then, we perceive and admire the sovereign providence of God, accomplishing his own purposes. A person of opulence, rank, and reputation, Joseph of Arimathea, was not afraid or ashamed to appear as an

* 2 Cor. v. 14, 15.

† Matt. xii. 40.

‡ Psal. xvi. 9.

§ Isa. liii. 9. Bp. Lowth's translation.

advocate for Jesus, in that state of greatest infamy, though he never before had the courage to avow the attachment which he felt. He requested of Pilate, that the body might be left to his care: which being granted, he took it down from the cross, and bound it up in clean linen. Nicodemus, also, of the same honourable situation in life, and of a similar disposition, having prepared spices and ointments for embalming the corpse, came and assisted in the pious work. These two, therefore, with all suitable respect and solemnity, committed Jesus to a tomb, which was Joseph's property, a perfectly new sepulchre, hewn out of the rock, and not far from the place of crucifixion. Thus "he, who was too poor to provide a sepulchre for himself, was honourably interred at the expense of the rich*." They, probably, understood not the importance of this action, to which they were led by a divine influence: but we should adore that wisdom, which overrules all events, and brings to pass the most unlikely things, for the completion of the scriptures.

The entrance into the cave, where Jesus lay, was secured by a large massy stone. The women, who attended him at the cross, followed him with weeping eyes to the grave, and took particular notice of the place and manner of his burial. All these circumstances occurred on the Friday. The next day was the sabbath, or the season of holy rest: but, even then, the adversaries of Jesus ceased not from their malicious

* Bp. Chandler's Defence of Christianity, See also Bp. Pearson on the Creed,

exertions. Not yet convinced by the miracles they had seen, nor satisfied with what their rage had inflicted, the Jewish leaders went to Pilate, and, having reproached the Saviour as a base impostor, desired that the sepulchre might be properly secured. They alleged, that peculiar care was requisite till the third day, lest his disciples should steal the body, and assert that he had risen from the dead, according to his prediction. Their request was granted; and therefore, to prevent any such fraud as they suspected, they sealed up the door of the cave, and placed a guard upon the spot.

Who is not struck with the malignant tempers of these opposers of Christ, who pursued him with their virulent reproaches even to the grave! Alas! what vile affections mark and disgrace the degenerate nature of man! Their invidious precautions, however, tended to his glory and their confusion! For it appeared from their testimony, that Jesus had expressly foretold his own resurrection: and they took the most effectual method to prove indisputably, not only that he was dead and buried, but also "that he rose again the third day, according to the scriptures*." Thus will the subtle devices and malicious efforts of our enemies concur to promote "the furtherance of the Gospel." The faithful servants of Christ have no reason to dread "what man can do against them."

While we accompany Jesus to the grave, let us reflect on our own approaching dissolution, and the gloomy habitation to which our breathless bodies will

* 1 Cor. xv. 3, 4.

be consigned. We must be committed to the ground; but how unlike to Jesus, who "saw no corruption!" We must turn, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust*." Yet, if believers, we may smile under this expectation. The burial of Jesus will reconcile us to our own, and teach us to think of it with delight. Do we not desire to be conformed to our exalted Head; and may we not conclude, that our flesh, also, shall "rest in hope?"

But this is an unpleasant and offensive subject to you, whose attention is fixed on present things and sensual enjoyments. Yet we entreat you to consider, what will become of those delicate bodies, which you adorn and pamper with so much care and expense. Think, where your pride and luxury must end, blooming and vigorous as you may now be. Pray, that, "by continually mortifying your corrupt affections, you may be buried with Christ †;" and then you may rejoice in confidence, that "though after your skin worms destroy this body, yet in your flesh you shall see God, whom you shall see for yourself, and your eyes shall behold, and not another ‡."

* Burial service.

† Collect for Easter even.

‡ Job xix. 26, 27.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 42.

Jesus was not left in hell—that he rose on the third day, is proved by the testimony of Roman soldiers, of many who examined his sepulchre, and of Angels—by his own appearing, to Mary Magdalene, to the other Mary and Salome, to Peter, to two disciples, and to the Apostles assembled together.

THE enemies of Jesus appeared to triumph in his crucifixion, as if they had attained their utmost wishes, and effectually ruined the schemes of the deceiver. They had secured, as they thought, their prisoner in the grave, beyond the possibility of any rescuer and with him all the hopes and expectations of his followers seemed to be buried. How dark and distressing was that season to his disciples! Such a degree of ignorance and unbelief still remained in them, that they were left in a state of extreme dejection. They had been unwilling to admit the idea of a suffering Saviour, supposing, like the other Jews, that the Messiah would establish a temporal dominion, that he would never die, and, if betrayed, would immediately effect his own release. Probably, they had no conceptions, that he would rise again, either totally forgetting, or grossly misunder-

misunderstanding all his declarations on that subject. We may conclude, therefore, that their minds were filled with black desponding thoughts, as if they had been deluded. "They had conceived great expectations from the persuasion, that he was the Christ of God. But these were all vanished, their promised deliverer, their expected King, was dead and buried, and no one left to call Him from the grave, as he did Lazarus*." Perhaps, too, the prospect of future difficulties oppressed and terrified their minds. What could they look for, but the most violent opposition, since their rulers had now prevailed against their Master, to destroy him?

We turn our attention from the sorrowing disciples to their departed Lord. While his body remained as a lifeless corpse in the tomb, whither did his spirit retire? Or what are we to understand by that article of our creed, "He descended into hell?" The full consideration of this point would not consist with the nature and brevity of our plan. But we observe, that, as the declaration is clearly deduced from scriptural expressions, we need not scruple to use it, though different interpretations have been delivered by learned

* West on the resurrection, p. 102. The author thinks it incumbent upon him to acknowledge the satisfaction and assistance he has received from that ingenious and valuable publication, in which the different, and apparently contradictory, accounts of the Evangelists respecting the resurrection are perfectly reconciled, and so arranged as to confirm each other. The reader, therefore, is apprized, that the statement of facts, which is here given, in proof of that important event, has been chiefly taken from Mr. West.

and pious men. Thus the prophet David speaks in the person of Messiah, foretelling his resurrection, "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell: neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption †." Nothing more, however, can be inferred from this passage, than, that the Saviour should continue for a short season in a state of death, his soul among other departed spirits in the invisible world, which is called **HADES** or **HELL**, and his body in the grave; and that, under the divine superintendence, the latter should be revived and again animated by the former, before putrefaction could take place.

We proceed, then, to consider his return to life; and we should do it with most devout affections, since it is an article, which lies at the foundation of our faith and hope. Intimations of this event had been given to the Church of old, by various types and ceremonial representations. It had, also, been declared by several prophets, particularly David and Isaiah. Accordingly, the Apostles in their addresses to the Jews maintained, that Jesus had exactly fulfilled their scriptures by his resurrection from the dead. He himself, as we have noted, had frequently predicted it, and on this very circumstance risked all the credit of his mission. So that, if he be not risen, he has not answered the proper character of the Messiah, and has falsified his own assertions: the Gospel may be rejected as a fraud; "our faith is vain, and we are yet in our sins †."

* Psalm. xvi. 10.

† 1 Cor. xv. 17.

It will be necessary to examine this matter with the greatest attention: and we should bless God, that he has not left us in a painful uncertainty, but afforded us such clear and decisive testimony, that we know not what could be required further. We maintain, that no event in ancient history is or can be confirmed by stronger attestations: if these be rejected, we must withhold our assent from every narration, and treat all the records of antiquity as idle tales or impositions. Infidels affect to be scrupulous, and cavil at the most unexceptionable evidence in support of the Gospel; but, on other points, they readily admit the grossest absurdities.

The fact, for which we contend, is, that Jesus of Nazareth, who died and was buried, did return to life, re-animate the same body which had been suspended on the cross, come out of the sepulchre on the morning of the third day from his crucifixion, and appear to many different persons at different times. Let the matter undergo a fair discussion: only let us yield to the force of argument, and not resist our convictions. If the position be proved, let it be allowed, that the Christian builds his hope on a firm foundation, and may, without presumption, rejoice in the assurance of a glorious immortality. A cloud of witnesses may be produced, whose attestations should be separately considered.

I. We appeal to the Roman soldiers, who were placed as a guard over the sepulchre. It seemed unlikely, that these men should deliver an evidence favourable to the cause of the Gospel. But this they

have done in the most decisive manner. Very early in the morning, just as it began to dawn, after a violent shaking of the earth, an Angel descended from heaven, and, rolling away the stone, broke open the tomb *. Thus an opportunity was afforded, not only for the departure of Jesus, (who could easily have forced his way through the rock) but also for the admission of others to examine and judge for themselves; especially as the sentinels were removed. These, notwithstanding their boasted courage, were unable to maintain their post. By the bright appearance of the Angel, whom they clearly saw, they were thrown into such consternation, that for some time they lay upon the ground, as persons dead. Being a little recovered from their terror, they fled with precipitate haste into the city, where they reported the matter.

Some of them carried the account to the chief priests, who could not but be amazed and confounded by such a testimony, and yet were determined not to be convinced. A council of the elders was summoned, and it was agreed to pay no serious regard to the story, though they could not contradict it, and to endeavour to prevent its probable effect upon the minds of others. They could not deny that the stone was rolled away, and the body gone; and they perceived that these facts must soon be publicly known. But they bribed the soldiers to conceal the vision of the Angel, and put into their mouths a strange, incoherent tale, as if the disciples of Jesus had opened the sepulchre and stolen him away, while the guards themselves were asleep.

* Matt. xxviii. 1—4, 11—15,

This,

This, it should seem, was the only defence ever pretended to be set up by those, who denied the resurrection: a proof of the weakness of their cause, which could want such a support. There is something so extremely absurd and incongruous upon the very face of this forged account, that it carries with it its own confutation. Not to mention the improbability, that Roman sentinels should fall asleep upon their station, which would have made them liable to death, and especially that the whole company should be thus overtaken together; who can believe, that the disciples should be able to remove the heavy stone, which alone closed up the grave, and that they should also bear off the body, so silently as to give no disturbance to those, who were close at hand? Or, who can credit the relation of those, who had so grossly violated their duty, or allow them to vouch a matter, of which, by their own confession, they could not be witnesses? We ask further, why was not the charge brought home against the followers of Jesus? When the Apostles, a few weeks afterwards, solemnly and confidently maintained before the rulers, that their Lord was risen, and that they themselves had seen him, why were they not confronted with this story? The reason is obvious; it was not only destitute of evidence, but would easily have been confuted; and, therefore, they were commanded merely to hold their peace. Their opponents, we perceive, admitted that the body, which had been secured in the sepulchre, was gone, and, by the miserable shift made use of to evade conviction, they

have not disproved, but rather confirmed, the relation of the Evangelist, who has given us a consistent account of the fact. This is not the only instance, in which the enemies of the Gospel have confounded themselves, and strengthened the cause, which they endeavoured to subvert. How astonishing is the power and wisdom of our God, who can turn the counsels of infidels into foolishness, and get himself glory by their malicious resistance!

II. We produce the attestations of various witnesses, who carefully examined for themselves, and declared that Jesus had quitted the sepulchre. The coincidence of these several evidences adds much to their weight. Many pious women, chiefly those who followed their Lord from Galilee, and ministered to his support, had made preparations for anointing and embalming his body with spices. 'This last tribute of respect for him, whom they so affectionately loved, they intended to pay early in the morning of the first day of the week, or the third from his crucifixion. It was agreed, that they should meet about sun-rising at the grave, not knowing, probably, that any guard had been fixed there. It should seem, that they went in separate companies, saw different visions, and reported their observations to the Apostles at distinct times. This easy and natural supposition perfectly reconciles the Evangelists, whose accounts, when thus taken together, make up one consistent story.

Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome, set out first, before the hour appointed, that they might
view

view the place, and consider what help might be necessary for rolling away the stone*. Just at that juncture, probably, the resurrection was effected. Upon their approach, therefore, they found that the stone was already removed. Immediately Mary Magdalene, suspecting that the body of her Lord had been carried off by enemies, left her companions, and returned to inform Peter and John, what she had seen, and what were her fears on the occasion. These two Apostles, surprised at the report, ran to the sepulchre with eager haste, that from their own personal inspection they might judge for themselves. They entered the cave, and perceived that their Master was not there: yet, as the burial clothes remained, carefully folded up and laid in separate places, it appeared that there had been no disorder or tumultuous hurry in his departure. From these circumstances, probably, John concluded, that Jesus was indeed revived; though none of the other Apostles, at that time, had any such conceptions.

The incidents, already mentioned, excited great wonder in the minds of all the disciples. When they saw that the body was gone, and could assign no reasons for its removal either by friends or enemies, the thought of its resurrection might, possibly, be suggested to them: yet this was an event, which they had not looked for, and which, even when direct evidence was offered, they were backward to admit. That

* Matt. xxviii. 1, Mark xvi. 1—4. Luke xxiv. 1—3. John xx. 1—10.

evidence we now proceed to state. It pleased God, in condescension to their ignorance and unbelief, to afford them one proof upon another, and so to overrule their scruples and objections, as thereby to confirm the important fact with additional and clearer testimonies. The extreme difficulty, with which they yielded their assent, so as to render these testimonies necessary, shews that they were incapable of forging the account.

III. We maintain, that Jesus arose from the dead, on the express and repeated declarations of Angels. These holy spirits had been employed on former occasions, in ministering to our Lord, and asserting his high character. Doubtless, at the season here referred to, they rejoiced and triumphed, and esteemed it an honour to themselves, to bear witness of his return to life. Several descriptions of their appearances for this purpose are given by the Evangelists; and such as at first view may be thought contradictory. But let it only be allowed, which is a reasonable supposition, that these heavenly messengers had a power of being visible or not, at pleasure, and were seen in different forms by different persons; and the objection of inconsistency is removed.

An Angel, clothed with transcendent brightness, came down to vindicate the credit and dignity of the Saviour: this he did by breaking open his sepulchre, and confounding the guards, who were set there to prevent his escape, and to prove him an impostor.

Two of the women, also, who had arrived first at the place, "the other Mary and Salome," whom
Mary

Mary Magdalene had left there, were favoured with a vision of the Angel, upon their entering into the cave. To disperse the terror, into which they were thrown, he declared expressly, that Jesus, whom they sought, was risen according to his own prediction, and invited them to examine the spot, where he had been interred *. He charged them likewise, to carry this information to his disciples, and especially to Peter, who, pained by the recollection of his fall, most needed consolation; and he assured them, that their Lord would meet them in Galilee, as he had promised a little before his death †. Impressed with awful reverence by what they had seen and heard, yet at the same time filled with exceeding joy, they hastened to communicate the glad tidings, as they had been directed.

Upon their departure, Mary Magdalene, who had returned to the sepulchre with Peter and John, remained at the outside in deep distress: but, while she lamented the loss of her dear Lord, she looked in, and perceived there two Angels in a glorious form, who sat as guards over the place, where Jesus had lain ‡. Mary soon afterwards retired, and then came Joanna and the rest of the women, who prepared the spices for anointing the body: and it is evident, that they then knew nothing of what had happened §. They were astonished, therefore, when they found that the sepulchre had been opened, and that their Lord was gone. Their doubts and perplexities, however, were

* Matt. xxviii. 5—8. Mark xvi. 5—8. † Mark xiv. 28.
 ‡ John xx. 11—13. § Luke xxiv. 1—11.

removed by the declarations of two heavenly spirits, who appeared to them in human form, and assured them, that Jesus had returned to life again, in completion of his own prophecies. This account was carried to the disciples, and probably reached them, before they had been informed of the other visions: yet such was their incredulity, that they could not entertain a thought of the resurrection, and at first considered the relations, as no other than the effect of fancy and illusion.

The evidence, here adduced, is strong and unquestionable. The persons described are credible witnesses of what they saw and heard: nor can their representations, with any consistency, be ascribed to imagination. The events, which took place, were such as they did not look for; and yet they were obliged by many concurrent circumstances to yield^e their assent. It can never be admitted, that both their eyes and their ears deceived them, or that so many should be imposed upon, in the very same manner, and at the same time.

These pious women, to whom the important information was first communicated, were abundantly recompensed for their zealous attachment to the Saviour. Innumerable instances confirm the promise of our gracious God to his faithful adherents, "Them, that honour me, I will honour*." May we be encouraged to be more bold and active in his service, and we shall obtain more clear and distinguished marks of his approbation!

* 1 Sam. ii. 30.

The preceding accounts left some doubt and hesitation upon the minds of the Apostles. They had been told, that Angels had asserted the resurrection of their Lord; but no one had yet seen him: and therefore, though they ought to have been convinced, a more direct evidence of the fact was necessary to overcome their incredulity, and accordingly it was afforded them, in condescension to their weakness. This is not the only instance, in which human infirmity has been the cause of a blessing to mankind, and an establishment of the truth and honour of God. In the case before us, it produced a record, which shall to eternity remain, for the comfort of every believer, and for the confusion and condemnation of every infidel.

IV. We contend, that Jesus incontestably demonstrated the point in question, by shewing himself alive to various persons, who had previously known him, and to whom he gave ample testimony of the reality and identity of his body.

1. He appeared to Mary Magdalene, before he vouchsafed the same favour to any of his former acquaintance*. We admire this grace and condescension in conferring such an honour upon a woman; who had probably been of an infamous character. But she had much forgiven, and she loved much. While she remained in tears at the sepulchre, and declared to the Angels the cause of her distress; Jesus came and placed himself beside her. At the first glance, she took him for the gardener; but her mistake

* Mark xvi. 9—11. John xx. 14—18.

was immediately corrected, when she heard him pronounce her name in the same tone of voice, and the same affectionate manner, which he had used in his former intercourse. Convinced that it was her Lord, she flew with ardour to embrace him. This, however, he told her, she must decline for the present, and intimated that he would see her again, and give her abundant proofs of the reality of his resurrection, before he finally quitted the earth. He charged her, therefore, to carry the account to his brethren without delay, and assure them in the kindest terms, that he still acknowledged his relation to them, and that, being mindful of their interests and of his own express declarations, he should soon ascend, by a corporeal translation, to his Father and their Father, to his God and their God.

O how free and abundant is his grace! What tenderness of compassion does he shew even to his fallen people! His disciples had deserted him in his extremity; but, immediately on his return to life, he was anxious to inform them, that they were as dear to him as ever, that he would continue to own them as children of the same Father, and plead their cause in heaven. The message was delivered; and yet their doubts were not dispersed. Possibly they argued, that, as Mary Magdalene alone pretended to have seen him, and as she had not at first recollected or been suffered to touch him, she might be under a delusion, or the vision, if real, might be no more than his spirit. But scruples of this kind were soon removed, as we observe

2. He appeared, also, to the other Mary and Salome*. They were flying from the sepulchre, being charged by the Angels with a commission to the disciples, when Jesus met them on the road, and addressed them in words of strong consolation. He exhorted them to dismiss their fears, and, by suffering them to embrace his feet, gave them a full conviction of his resurrection. By them, too, he sent word to his brethren, that in Galilee, where they chiefly resided, he would afford them a gracious interview. From this occurrence the evidence was considerably strengthened. Yet the Apostles, being "slow of heart to believe," might ask, "If the Lord be risen indeed, why has he shewn himself only to the women, and not to any of us?" It is presumptuous, we confess, to refuse our assent to fair testimony, and demand additional proofs for the removal of our unreasonable doubts. But the Lord condescended to prevent or obviate such an objection.

3. He appeared to Peter. In the message of the Angels to the disciples, particular mention had been made of Peter; but, though he had twice visited the sepulchre, once after the first report of Mary Magdalene, and again after that of Joanna†, yet he had not seen either Jesus or the Angels. At length, however, his Master favoured him with an interview, probably before any of the other Apostles. The circumstances of that interview are not recorded, but the fact is expressly declared‡; and it stands as an instance of

* Matt. xxviii. 9, 10. † Luke xxiv. 12. ‡ 24. 1 Cor. xv. 5.

his tenderness to backsliders. He will recover, and pardon, and comfort. Such was his conduct to Peter, whose fall had been attended with the greatest aggravations, and to whom, even before the rest, he hastened to declare his forgiveness and love.

Still it might be argued, that all the preceding manifestations of the risen Saviour had been an appeal to the senses, rather than the understanding. They had been bright and dazzling, sudden and of short continuance, leaving little or no time for cool reflection and a deliberate examination of the scriptures. That there might be no ground for such an objection,

4. He appeared, the same day, to two other disciples, as they were going to Emmaus, about seven or eight miles from Jerusalem*. These persons were discoursing together, with an evident dejection of mind, on the late astonishing events, which engrossed their thoughts, when the Lord himself drew near, and with great familiarity joined their conversation, though he concealed his real character. It was his gracious purpose at this time, not to excite their wonder by any splendid vision, but to convince them by cool and solid reasoning from the sacred oracles, that they ought to have expected his death and return to life, since these things had been expressly predicted. They were prevented, therefore, by a miraculous agency, from recollecting and discovering him, till he had discussed the important topic, by a particular explanation of the

* Luke xxiv. 13—35.

types and prophecies relating to it, and reprovèd them for their ignorance and unbelief. When they came to Emmaus, he went into the same house, through their earnest request, and sat down with them to table. At this repast, he blessed and distributed the bread, according to his former manner, perhaps with the solemnity of the sacramental supper; and immediately the dimness which had been cast over their eyes was removed, and they recognized the person of their beloved Master. But, the end of his appearance being answered, he instantly withdrew from their sight.

As they reviewed this singular occurrence, they wondered at their own stupidity, remarking that they might have known him from the extraordinary energy of his words and the effect produced in their minds. They said one to another, " Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" Their doubts were all removed; they felt a rational conviction of their Lord's resurrection, and perceived that every thing had happened in perfect consistence with God's declarations. That same evening they returned to Jerusalem, where they found the Apostles assembled together and exulting in the thought, that their Lord was risen indeed, and had shewn himself to Peter. The different accounts were then compared; and yet, decisive as these testimonies were, some, at least, in the company withheld their assent, or, perhaps, allowing the accounts, concluded that his spirit only had been seen, and that his body, if revived, was carried up to heaven.

heaven*. How gracious and condescending was the Saviour to these weak, doubting, and incredulous disciples! To satisfy their scruples, and prove incontestably, that his re-animated body yet remained upon earth, he manifested himself again that very hour. We add, therefore,

5. He appeared to the Apostles, then assembled together†. He entered the room in a miraculous manner; we need not explain or enquire, by what particular method. He stood in the midst, with expressions of love in his countenance, and addressed them with words of consolation. Surprise and terror overpowered them; and still it should seem, they were unwilling to admit, that the vision was any thing more than that of his spirit. But he, in tender compassion, dispersed their fears, and banished their suspicions.

At length, then, the evidence was full and complete. Not the women only, but the Apostles themselves, were witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. He was seen, not merely by one or two, but by many together. Nor did he suddenly withdraw, like an airy phantom; for he now gave them decisive proofs of the reality and sameness of his body. "Here," said he, "behold my wounded hands, and feet, and side, which retain the marks of what I suffered on the cross. It is Jesus, your Lord and Master, who stands before you. Take full satisfaction, and by touching and embracing

* Mark xvi. 13.

† Mark xvi. 14. Luke xxiv. 36—43. John xx, 19—23.

me be convinced, that this is not a spectre, but a real, corporeal substance."

O what transports of joy must have filled their hearts! Surely they felt the most ardent affections of gratitude, love, and zeal. Yet perhaps, for a moment, the whole transaction might appear too wonderful to be true. He remained, however, in their presence for some time, upbraiding them with their perverse and obstinate incredulity, and evincing by further arguments the certainty of his resurrection. He condescended to eat, in their company, the very food which they themselves offered him. Again he expressed his earnest desires for their happiness, pronounced his benediction, and renewed their Apostolical commission. While he breathed on them, he gave them assurances of large communications of the Spirit, and engaged to ratify their sentence, when they should declare, to whom remission of sins should be extended, and from whom withheld.

Here we pause, and thus close the evidence, exhibited on the day in which our Lord rose from the dead. The subject requires a more full and particular application, than the present section will admit. Let us meditate upon it, for our own spiritual improvement. These numerous attestations were intended for our conviction, as well as for that of the Apostles. Even the pertinacity of their unbelief has eventually proved a blessing, as confirming more abundantly the truth of the scriptures. We see, then, on how firm a basis our faith and hope are built, and how guilty, how inexcusable those are, who reject
or

or despise the Gospel. The fact, which is here maintained, constitutes an essential article of our creed: the whole system of Christianity must stand or fall with it. But so decisive are these testimonies, that we may defy the most powerful and malevolent attacks of infidels; all their attempts to subvert the foundation of our religion will turn to their own confusion.

In the resurrection of Jesus we perceive a never-failing source of consolation. We rejoice in the sufficiency of that ransom, which he paid down, and in the complete victory which he has obtained for us over all our spiritual enemies. With peculiar exultation, therefore, we sing, "Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*:" and, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead †." But does this song of triumph properly belong to us? What are the advantages which we have derived from the Saviour? By our own experience of his ability to save, can we stand forth as his witnesses, maintaining that "the Lord is risen indeed?"

Let us not forget, that he will appear again, in the very same body, which was crucified on mount Calvary, and came forth from the sepulchre on the third day. His faithful people shall then meet him "with joy unspeakable and full of glory:" he will raise them up by his mighty power, and admit them to a state of

* 1 Cor. xv. 57.

† 1 Pet. i. 3.

delightful intercourse with himself for evermore. But how will those behold him, "who have crucified him afresh," and continued to pierce him by their contemptuous unbelief? He will be their Judge; and such will be his manifestation, as to overwhelm them with confusion, horror, and despair. May we obtain redemption through his blood, and "know the power of his resurrection," so that, "when He, who is our life, shall appear, we also may appear with him in glory*!" Amen.

* Col. iii. 4.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 43.

Jesus appeared at Jerusalem, for the conviction of Thomas—at the sea of Tiberias—on a mountain in Galilee—and again at Jerusalem, a little before his ascension.

NEVER was there an event of greater importance to mankind, than the resurrection of Jesus Christ; and never was any fact so well attested. One evidence was added to another, to prevent or remove every doubt. Jesus “ shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs *,” till he had convinced the most unbelieving, and satisfied the most scrupulous, of his disciples. He appeared to them not merely once, but frequently, and gave them full liberty to examine, by such trials as they desired, whether he had risen with a real body, the very same which they had formerly known, and which they had beheld suspended on the cross. He came to them in different places, continued long in their company, did eat and drink with them, and delivered particular instructions and commandments, “ being seen of them forty days, speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”

* Acts i. 3.

These visits of the Saviour to his Apostles were intended, not only to assure them of his high regard, and promote their particular comfort, but to qualify them for the important office of attesting his resurrection, and proclaiming his salvation to the various kingdoms of the world. Accordingly, in due time, they went forth and avowed themselves his witnesses, in the face of the most malignant and powerful opposers. They have given a clear, decided, and indubitable testimony of the fact, which we are considering; and their declarations ought to be seriously regarded. They could not be deceived by the united report of so many of their senses, for they heard, and saw, and handled their beloved Master; nor would they have concerted such a plan for deceiving mankind, when they had nothing to expect from it, but the most violent persecution even unto death itself.

We have already mentioned our Lord's appearances on the day of his resurrection, and shall now advert to those, which occurred from that time to his ascension. May our contemplations on this subject promote in us all holy affections! May we not merely assent to the doctrine proposed, but derive from it an increase of faith, hope, love, and joy!

I. He appeared with a particular view to the conviction of Thomas*. Evidence sufficient had been given to all the other Apostles; and accordingly they were satisfied. Indeed, they ought to have yielded their assent much sooner than they did; and therefore

* John xx. 24-29.

Jesus reprehended them for their unbelief. But when he first shewed himself to them, as they were assembled together, Thomas was not present, and, upon the report being carried to him, he refused to credit their testimony. He presumptuously required the conviction of his own senses, before he would allow the appearance to be the very body of his Lord. He declared, that he would see, and put his finger into, the print of the nails, which had been used in the crucifixion, and thrust his hand into the side, which had been pierced by the soldier's spear, or else, that he would reject all other evidence.

Thomas, it seems, remained in this state of darkness and unbelief for a whole week. During that time we do not find that Jesus visited any of his disciples: perhaps he designed, that in the interval they might be more at leisure for a deliberate examination of the scriptures, and the attestations already given. But on the eighth day following, or the next return of the first day of the week*, he came, in the same miraculous manner as before, into the midst of their assembly. Having declared an affectionate regard for them all, he condescended to address the incredulous Apostle, who was then present, and for his full satisfaction offered him the very proofs, which his presumption had demanded.

* It is likely, that the first day of the week, from that time, became the stated season of the solemn meetings in the Church, and was celebrated as the Christian sabbath, being distinguished by the high and honourable appellation of the Lord's Day. Acts xx. 7. 1 Cor. xvi. 2. Rev. i. 10.

What further objection could remain? Thomas was ashamed and humbled: convinced by such undeniable evidence, he acknowledged not the resurrection only, but the Godhead of his Saviour, and worshipped him with profound reverence and adoration, crying out, "MY LORD, AND MY GOD!" His former weakness was now pardoned, and his faith, though it rested on sensible demonstration, was graciously accepted. Jesus rebuked him, but with tenderness, for having so long refused his credit, and pronounced a peculiar blessing on those, who, with real humility of mind, yield an unfeigned assent and submission to the Gospel, even though such strong testimonies should be withheld, as a sceptical and arrogant caviller might require.

This occurrence should warn us to beware of unbelief, which may, probably, attack us in various degrees, and in different shapes. How many around us are perplexed with unreasonable doubts and scruples about the doctrines, and even the truth of revelation! Do you complain, that sufficient evidence is not afforded you? But do you not indulge a very blamable disposition, as Thomas did, whilst you are unwilling to admit that light, which might produce conviction? Have you fairly studied the subject, and diligently examined the proofs and arguments, in which others acquiesce? It is not for you to prescribe to God, by what particular means he ought to confirm his word. There is no need of further information, if only your hearts were right. "Be not faithless, but believing." You should not expect or

ask for such kind of demonstration, as Thomas received; but learn with him to bow with real subjection to the Saviour, acknowledging his essential glory, and his indubitable right to your love, reverence, and obedience, while you say from the heart, "My Lord, and my God."

II. He appeared at the sea of Tiberias*. The disciples, having remained the full time at Jerusalem for the celebration of the passover, returned to Galilee, where the chief part of them resided. Thither the Angel directed them to go, and there Jesus himself promised to meet them. It is probable, that his most frequent visits were made in that country, where his interviews with friends might be more convenient, and less likely to excite notice and resentment, than at Jerusalem. A minute account of these interviews is not given us; nor is it necessary, as they were designed, not for the proof of his resurrection, which was then sufficiently established, but for the private instruction and comfort of his dear followers. In every fresh conference he confirmed their faith, displayed his own power and grace, and manifested the most tender affection for them. This we cannot but remark, in the instance now before us.

Several of his disciples were engaged in fishing, which had once been their common occupation; and, probably, they were still obliged to have recourse to it for their support. When they had laboured a whole night in vain, Jesus presented himself to them on the

* John xxi. 1, &c.

sea shore, and directed them where to cast their net. A miraculous draught immediately convinced them, that it was their Lord, who was at hand, and had given them such success. They hastened to him; and upon their arrival, having prepared a fire and provisions, he condescended to eat with them.

Perhaps, by that large capture he intended to afford them a seasonable relief for their necessities, and to encourage their dependence upon him, as the Lord of providence and grace. They were appointed to be fishers of men; and, though in their office they might seem for a long time to labour with no good effect, they were now taught, that, under his direction and influence, they might hope to inclose immense multitudes in the net of the Gospel. Blessed Jesus, compassionate the ignorance and weakness of thy ministers in our day! While they lament, that they weary themselves in vain, do thou graciously instruct them, where and how they should cast the net, so that many may be taken!

In discoursing with his disciples on that occasion, Jesus paid a particular regard to Peter, probably on account of his late fall, not only to reprove, but to restore and comfort him. After dinner, our Lord proposed a solemn enquiry to the Apostle, whether, as he had once professed, he loved him more than all his brethren did. Peter replied with great firmness, that he felt the most sincere affection for his Lord, and appealed to Him, as the searcher of hearts, for the truth of the declaration: but, remembering his own perfidious conduct, he dared not to boast, as he had done

before, that his attachment was stronger than that of others. Jesus then required him to prove his regard, by faithfully performing the pastoral office, feeding the lambs of his flock. Thrice did he renew the question, " Lovest thou me," and thrice repeat the charge, " Feed my sheep."

Let each one consider himself as addressed by the Saviour in the same solemn manner, " Lovest thou me?" What answer could we return? Some with humble confidence might maintain, even in his presence, that their hearts glow with the warmest affection for him. But many, whose minds are attracted by different objects, notwithstanding their profession of serious desires, can come to no satisfactory determination about the real state of their souls, and therefore remain in a very painful suspense. Others surely, if thus interrogated, must be confounded; since their habitual dispositions and general practices declare an avowed disregard, and even an insolent contempt, of Jesus. It will be soon decided, whether we have a real attachment to his name; and " if any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ," a tremendous " anathema" rests upon his head*.

Peter was then informed, that in his old age he should be called to glorify God by suffering the same kind of death, as his divine Master had done, and he was immediately charged to follow Him. A vain and foolish curiosity tempted the Apostle to enquire, what should become of John, the beloved disciple, who, it

* 1 Cor. xvi. 22.

should seem, proceeded with silent meekness to attend his Lord. But curiosity is seldom gratified. In the present instance, it met with a reproof; for Jesus replied, "What is that to thee? Follow thou me."

Possibly, we may wish to propose a thousand questions more absurd and impertinent than Peter's was. But let us learn to check our eagerness for information in matters, which do not concern us. Why are we so anxious about events, with which neither our happiness nor duty is at all connected? One thing is of unspeakable importance and absolute necessity; nor should any other subject occupy the mind to the neglect of this: it is, that we obey the Saviour's call, and go forth at his command. Are we willing to comply with the injunction, as the Apostles did, though contempt and poverty, imprisonment and death, await us? How many shrink at the appearance of danger! May the love of Christ constrain us; and under that influence, leaving all idle speculations, and fearless of the severest calamities, we shall follow him cheerfully, counting nothing of any real value but his favour, his service, and glory!

III. He appeared to a large body of his disciples upon a mountain in Galilee*. It should seem, that many, perhaps the most of those, who professed an affectionate regard to him in that country, met there by his appointment. Probably, he had fixed the time and place, that a great number might more conveniently come together. It is supposed, that Saint Paul

* Matt. xxviii. 16, 17.

refers to that assembly, when he says, "He was seen of above five hundred brethren at once*;" and we learn that the chief part of these persons survived for several years, and attested the fact, of which they were eye-witnesses.

Upon a particular mountain, to which they had been directed, Jesus presented himself in the midst of them. Some had been disposed to doubt his resurrection; but they were then convinced. They saw, believed, and worshipped him. May we, also, confess his glory, and bow before him with humble adoration! It is as incumbent upon us to do it, as it was upon the disciples in Galilee; though we are not favoured with the same discoveries, which they had. Our faith is supported by unquestionable evidence. May the Saviour manifest himself to us by the power of his Spirit: and then we shall join our testimony with that of the ancient Church, and we shall say, "The Lord is risen indeed!"

Afterwards he appeared to James, but no particulars of that visit are recorded; and once again to all the Apostles, as we shall soon remark†. He did not shew himself alive in a more public manner, either to the whole body of the people, or to the chief priests and rulers‡. Such an exhibition was not necessary to prove the truth of his resurrection, which is established by the testimony of a sufficient number of indubitable witnesses. That peculiar favour could not be due to

* 1 Cor. xv. 6.

† 1 Cor. xv. 7.

‡ Acts x. 41. See Bp. Atterbury's Sermon on this subject.

those, who had rejected him with so much contempt and violence. Besides, if it had been granted, it was not likely to produce any good effect, since they refused to be convinced by all that he had said or done, and ascribed his miracles, illustrious as they were, to the power of magic or the agency of Satan. God is usually pleased to withhold an increase of spiritual means and privileges from them, who abuse or despise what they possess, and to bestow greater advantages upon such, as highly value, and diligently improve, what they have already received. Let us fear for ourselves, lest, by shutting our eyes against the light of his truth, we provoke him to withdraw it from us.

IV. He appeared, also, to the Apostles on their return to Jerusalem. As the feast of Pentecost, one of their grand solemnities, was approaching, their presence was required by the law. They arrived in that city some days before the festival, and were there favoured, as in Galilee, with the gracious visits of their Master, previous to his ascension*. Upon these occasions he renewed to them some of his former instructions, and confirmed their Apostolic commission. He directed their attention to the scriptures of the old Testament, that they might see the glorious plan of salvation to have been the same from the beginning, and be convinced that every thing had happened to him in perfect agreement with the ancient prophecies.

* Matt. xxviii. 18—20. Mark xvi. 15—18. Luke xxiv. 44—49. It is not clear, how often these visits were repeated, or whether the whole of the addresses, here mentioned, were delivered to the disciples at one time.

These they had overlooked, or grossly misconceived. But now he opened their understandings, and gave them clearer and more consistent views of what the sacred oracles had asserted concerning his death and resurrection. He taught them, that, in consequence of what he had done, sinners should be called upon to repent, and assured of the forgiveness of their sins through faith in his name. The necessity of conversion, and the offer of pardon through his blood, were some of the grand doctrines, which he commanded them to preach among all nations; and these doctrines are evidently founded on the supposition, that all men, without exception, are involved in a state of depravity and condemnation.

We remark, in an especial manner, that they were directed to open their proclamation of mercy at Jerusalem, that iniquitous and murderous city, where the Lord of glory had been crucified and slain. This was a wise appointment; because their bold defence of the Gospel, in the place where it might and must have been confuted, if it had been a mere fable, has clearly confirmed its truth. We admire, also, the grace of Jesus here exhibited, in sending the first message of peace to his bloody persecutors, who but a few days before had cried out with malicious rage, "Away with him, crucify him." Who now can despair of obtaining forgiveness, when offenders, under a load of such aggravated guilt, are invited and entreated to return and live? Let those, who have sinned the most heinously and with the greatest obduracy, be encouraged to listen to the publication of the Gospel, which

which has opened a way for their reconciliation and acceptance with God. Behold! "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound*."

Jesus charged his Apostles to bear a faithful testimony of these things, wherever they should go, and assured them that they should be qualified for their office by the influence of the Holy Ghost, which they were directed to wait for in Jerusalem a few days longer. He reminded them, that he now possessed absolute and supreme authority, and that both heaven and earth were subjected to his dominion. As universal Lord, he sent them forth to the uttermost parts of the world, to preach the Gospel to the whole human species. He instructed them to endeavour, among all nations, to make profelytes to his religion, and to baptize all, who professed submission, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost †." He declared, that every one conforming to this sacramental rite, and maintaining real faith in him, should be admitted to a state of eternal bliss and glory; but at the same time he denounced the divine vengeance, in its most terrible effects of everlasting

* Rom. v. 20.

† This form of words, appointed to be used in Christian baptism, is generally urged, and with great propriety, as a decisive proof of the doctrine of the Trinity, and will, probably, be the means of supporting that doctrine to the end of time. For here, not only are the three persons distinctly mentioned, but divine honour and worship are ascribed to each; since all, who are baptized, are dedicated to the service of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and taught to depend upon them, and give glory to them, for the blessings of redemption.

misery,

misery, against every unbelieving sinner. To confirm the message of his Apostles, he promised to endue them with various miraculous powers: and, after enjoining them to inculcate upon their converts a sincere regard to the principles and duties of the Gospel, he added a gracious assurance of his own continual presence with them, and with his Church, even till the consummation of all things.

Thus far he has proved himself true to his word. The Apostles, to whom he delivered this important commission, were fitted for their office by the abundant influence of his Spirit. By an extraordinary measure of wisdom, zeal, and courage, they were enabled to preach and propagate Christianity from kingdom to kingdom, to the extremities of the earth; and at the same time the many signs and wonders, which they wrought, have given a weight and validity to their doctrines.

We enjoy the benefit of their instructions and labours: and we bless God, that, though the supernatural operations, which they performed, are now ceased, the same Gospel is published among ourselves. It is the will of Jesus, that the light of his truth should still shine upon the world; and the ministers, who go forth under his direction, maintain no other principles, than what he commanded to be taught. They preach repentance and remission of sins through faith in his blood. They declare, as absolutely as the Apostles could, "He, who believeth and is baptized, shall be saved;" and they are also constrained to add, on the same authority, that most offensive denunciation, "He, who believeth not, shall be damned."

We have been received into his Church by baptism, and are his professed disciples. We should be reminded, then, that we are solemnly devoted to God in his Covenant, and laid under the strongest obligations to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, whose name is named upon us. Are we walking consistently with these engagements? Let us not depend upon the mere initiatory right of the sacramental water, as if this would ensure salvation, but enquire, if we are joined to Christ by a true and lively faith, the want of which must expose us to everlasting destruction. Let us search and judge ourselves impartially. The matter to be examined is of unspeakable importance: it is no less than this, whether we shall be saved or perish for ever.

The ministers of Christ are called to an arduous employment, even as the Apostles were; and a sense of their own insufficiency would totally discourage them, if their exalted Master had not pledged himself for their support. But, confiding in his promise, "I am with you alway," they may cheerfully expect all needful assistance, and rejoice in the hope, that they shall not labour in vain. The violence of persecution, or the prevalence of corrupt doctrine, may sometimes excite their fears, as if the very existence of the Church was endangered. But let them remember, that Jesus is engaged to secure its continuance "even unto the end of the world." The vessel may be tossed upon a tempestuous sea, but He sitteth at the helm; and we should be satisfied to leave it under his care. Whatever opposition he may be pleased
to

to permit, his truth shall remain and prosper in the earth: "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*." The same gracious declaration may likewise animate and enliven private Christians. He, whom they serve, will stand by them and save them; for, though his bodily presence be removed, he hath said to every believer; "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee†." O trust in him, and dismiss your fears! He will guide you through the intricate mazes of life, protect you from the assaults of your strongest enemies, and comfort your drooping spirits in seasons of severest affliction.

How many important consequences follow from the resurrection of Jesus! Let us briefly advert to some of those advantages, which result to his faithful people.

1. If Jesus be risen indeed, then the sacrifice, which he has offered, is accepted; "justice is satisfied; and nothing further is required for the expiation of our guilt. "He was delivered for our offences," and, when he was discharged from his confinement in the grave, the Lord God declared in effect, that every demand was answered, that the ransom was sufficient, and that pardon and peace were fully procured by this atonement. Therefore "he was raised again for our justification‡." In dependence on the blood of the cross, we may take up that song of holy exultation, "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth: Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again§."

* Matt. xvi. 18.

† Rom. iv. 25.

‡ Heb. xiii. 5.

§ viii. 33, 34.

2. By the resurrection of Jesus we perceive, that he is able to supply the necessities of his people. Let us hear his own exalted declaration, "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore *:" and let us remember, that the life, which he now possesses, he employs for the benefit of his Church. What strong consolation does this administer! In that state of glorious existence, to which he is restored, what cannot he effect or bestow? This subject will be resumed; but, for the present, let us rejoice, that, "being reconciled to God by the death of his Son, we shall be saved by his life †." He has power "to strengthen such as do stand, and to comfort and help the weak-hearted; and to raise up them that fall, and finally to beat down Satan under our feet ‡." Let us humbly solicit, and thankfully receive, that grace, which he waits to communicate to them that ask him.

3. Since Jesus is revived, it appears undeniably that he has overcome death and the grave, and will make us partakers of his victory. He rose like a mighty conqueror, and proved himself superior to those formidable opponents. But he rose, also, in the name and as the representative of his people. The pains of dissolution await them, and their bodies must be consigned to the dust; but he will bring them up with triumph and great glory, and they shall reign with him for ever and ever. How should this prospect animate and enliven your souls, if you have "known the power of his resurrection," and believed in his name!

* Rev. i. 18.

† Rom. v. 10.

‡ Litany.

How different will be your portion, who remain in ignorance and contempt of him ! You, also, shall be raised; but you will “ awake to shame and everlasting contempt*.” You shall come forth, however reluctantly, and feel the vengeance of that Almighty Saviour, whose counsels of mercy you rejected : for then nothing shall “ hide you from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb†.” May you now hear his voice, calling you to repentance; and, by the grace of his Spirit, may you, who are “ dead in sins,” be “ quickened together with Christ!” So shall you be “ raised up together, and made to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus‡.” Amen.

* Dan. xii. 2. † Rev. vi. 16. ‡ Eph. ii. 5, 6.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 44.

Jesus ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, as our High priest, Benefactor, and King.

AFTER considering the whole of our Lord's continuance upon earth, his holy conduct, miracles, and doctrines, his sufferings, death, burial, and resurrection, we might be expected to close the account of this astonishing character. But it may tend to increase the hope and joy of our souls, to enquire, in what state he now dwells, and in what momentous concerns his reassumed life is occupied. This opens a fresh and extensive subject, which may enlarge our conceptions of his glory and grace. He is removed to the bright world above, but he has not relinquished the object, for which he became incarnate. There are those even here below, who yet maintain spiritual communion with him, and who receive constant proofs of his affectionate regard and watchful care. May every reader be so acquainted with the Saviour, as to be a witness of his power, faithfulness, and love, and recommend him to the notice and admiration of others! We observe,

I. He ascended into heaven. Various types and prophecies referred to this event. The entrance of the Jewish high priest into the holy of holies on the solemn day of atonement, was a striking representation of the Messiah's going up to appear in the immediate presence of God*. The exaltation of the ark upon the hill of Zion, prefigured the same thing. David, therefore, in many of his psalms, is led from this very circumstance to speak in such elevated language, as can be applied only to the important subject before us †.

Jesus himself, also, both before and after his resurrection, foretold his own assumption. "In my Father's house," said he, "are many mansions: I go to prepare a place for you:"—"I leave the world, and go to the Father:"—"I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God ‡." The event, which answered to these declarations, is recorded with great exactness.

The Apostles returned to Jerusalem a little before the feast of Pentecost, and, being there assembled together, were favoured with the presence of their divine Master §. He conducted them out of the city to the mount of Olives, even to the confines of Bethany, the place which he had so frequently visited. In this interview, doubtless, they received many important instructions.

* Heb. ix. 7, 11, 12.

† Psal. xxiv. xlvii. lxviii.

‡ John xiv. 2. xvi. 28. xx. 17.

§ Mark xvi. 19, &c. Luke xxiv. 50, &c. Acts i. 4—12.

He charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, till they had obtained the promised influence of the Holy Ghost. They enquired, whether he intended at that time to restore the kingdom to Israel; for they concluded, that he was about to accomplish some great object, and still entertained the expectation of temporal grandeur and dominion, as annexed to the reign of the Messiah. But, to restrain their curiosity about the state in which his Church should be fixed, he observed, that they were not permitted to know the secret purposes of God. He exhorted them to attend to their proper duty, and assured them, that, as they were appointed to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth, they should soon be qualified for the arduous work by the assistance of the Spirit.

He then lifted up his hands, with great solemnity, as did the Jewish high priest over the people*, and blessed them, commending them to the divine protection. In that posture, so expressive of his dignity, and with words of kindness in his mouth, he was separated from them, and ascended up to heaven in a slow, majestic manner. They beheld him rising, in a splendid form, till at length their eyes could follow him no longer: a bright cloud received him; and he entered with a numerous retinue, and amidst the joyful acclamations of Angels, into his Father's courts above.

His disciples, filled with devout admiration, remained fixed, probably, in prayer and praise, worship-

* Lev. ix. 22.

ping their exalted Lord and Master, till two of his bright attendants came to inform them, that Jesus, who was then taken up to glory, would return to the earth again at the end of time, with the same marks of dignity and triumph. Nothing more could be wanted to confirm their faith, or gladden their hearts. According to their Lord's command, they took up their abode at Jerusalem, where they continued to be engaged in all religious exercises, till the Holy Ghost descended, and by his miraculous powers enabled them to go forth, to preach and propagate the Gospel throughout the world.

Such is the authentic relation which is given us, and with this account the history of the four Evangelists is closed. The beloved disciple assures us, that, out of the numerous transactions of the Saviour, a few only are selected, and that the sole design of this sacred narrative is, to induce men to believe on Jesus for their eternal salvation *. Ah! how great is their perverseness and stupidity, who, while they can eagerly attend to every trifling occurrence, disregard these matters, so astonishing and so infinitely momentous! This is worse than absurdity, it is the basest wickedness, the highest contempt of God. All those, therefore, who despise and reject his mercy, tendered to them in the Gospel of his Son, will be left without excuse. Every article of this well-attested record will rise up in judgment to condemn them.

* John xx. 30, 31. xxi. 24, 25.

But what do we conclude from the event last mentioned? We observe,

1. By our Lord's ascension his dignity was displayed, not so much upon earth, as in the world above. His triumph before men is reserved for a future day: but, when he went up to heaven, the celestial spirits, who surround the throne of God, beheld his glory, waited on him as his servants, and sang his praises. "The chariots of God," on which he then rode with victorious majesty, "are twenty thousand, even thousands of Angels*." According to David's sublime description, his attendants fly before him, and demand an admission for the illustrious conqueror in such words as these, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in." The enquiry is made, "Who is this King of glory?" and the answer is returned, "The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle;—the Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory†." The gates being thrown open to receive him, acclamations of joy and shouts of loudest applause are heard through the celestial mansions. The Father himself welcomes his approach, and says, "Thou art my Son, sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool: Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever‡."

The holy Angels had beheld with amazement their incarnate God, suffering, bleeding, dying: but then they celebrated his triumph, when they saw, that by

* Psal. lxxviii. 17.

† xxiv. 7—10.

‡ Heb. i. 5, 8, 13.

the sacrifice of himself he had defeated the daring purposes of infernal spirits, “ had spoiled principalities and powers, and made a shew of them openly *.” “ The number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb, that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing †.” Surely it becometh us upon earth to echo back this song with warmest affections, rejoicing in that complete victory which our Jesus has obtained over sin, Satan, death, and the grave, and in that exaltation which he now possesses.

The ascension, of which we speak, is not that of the Godhead merely, which, if intelligible, would be nothing wonderful; it is that of the MAN Christ Jesus. The human nature, which was assumed in the virgin’s womb, and suffered on the cross, was raised to heaven, and admitted to a participation of the throne of God. In order to recompense the voluntary humiliation of Jesus, and display his ability to save, “ God hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father ‡.” Let us, therefore, regard him in this state of elevated dignity with profound adoration. Let us look up to him for grace, mercy, and peace; the blessings, which we continually

* Col. ii. 15. † Rev. v. 11, 12. ‡ Phil. ii. 9—11.

need, and which he alone is able to bestow. Let us prostrate ourselves, as guilty criminals, with unfeigned subjection at his feet, and we shall shortly be advanced to his presence, and share his bliss and glory. For we observe,

2. By our Lord's ascension, an entrance into heaven is secured for all his faithful followers. He went up, not in his own name only, but in that of his people, as their head and representative. According to the Covenant, he demanded the kingdom for those, whom he had purchased by his blood, and then took possession on their behalf. How animating is the consideration to all those, who, oppressed with a sense of their guilt and misery, "have fled for refuge" to this gracious Saviour! It may seem, as if the holy mansions were barred against them for their unworthiness, and all expectation of admission were presumptuous. But Jesus hath opened, "and no man shutteth *." "I go," said he, "to prepare a place for you:—and I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that, where I am, there ye may be also †." He assured his disciples, that his immortality would be their security; and therefore his reception into glory is a pledge, that they shall not be cast out: "Because I live, ye shall live also ‡." He also declared, long after his ascension, for the encouragement of all who fight under the banner of his cross, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne §."

What, then, should damp your joy, or shake your confidence, if you have believed in his name? Look

* Rev. iii. 7. † John xiv. 2, 3. ‡ 19. § Rev. iii. 21.

up to the highest heavens, and there see your elder Brother, who holds the kingdom for you, till you arrive at the proper age to take possession in your own persons. You are the members of his body; and you shall shortly be with your exalted Head. Jesus, "the fore-runner, is for you entered into that within the veil*." Can you want any further assurance, that you and all his redeemed company shall follow him, and attain the glorious abode, to which he is gone before?

II. He now sitteth at the right hand of God. This is an important article of our creed, from which we may derive strong consolation. David predicted, that his Lord Messiah should be fixed in that state of high advancement, till all opposition be effectually subdued†; and, in various places of the new testament, this prophecy is declared to be fulfilled in Jesus‡. He himself foretold it, even in his deepest abasement, when he stood before the Jewish council, arraigned as a criminal: "Hereafter," said he, "shall the Son of man sit on the right hand of the power of God§." This was not a vain boast: the fact is sufficiently attested by those, to whom it was revealed by the Spirit, that "he is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God, Angels, and authorities, and powers, being made subject unto him||."

We attempt not to describe the glory of the celestial world, which is so far beyond our comprehension, that

* Heb. vi. 19, 20.

† Psal. cx. 1.

‡ Matt. xxii. 44.

Acts ii. 34, 35. 1 Cor. xv. 25. Heb. i. 13.

§ Luke xxii. 69.

|| 1 Pet. iii. 22.

we should soon be lost in the sublimity of the subject. Yet it is not difficult to understand something of what is meant to be conveyed, in the account of our Lord's present situation. "The right hand of God" does not imply that He has any corporeal substance or parts of a body. But, as with us the right hand is the chief instrument of action, generally put forth when our strength is exerted, and therefore used to denote power, so this phrase expresses the absolute and uncontrollable dominion of Jehovah. The right hand also, with men, is the place of honour and distinction: there cannot be a seat of higher exaltation than that which is nearest to the king, the right hand of majesty. So far, then, is clear, that the state, which our Lord possesses in heaven, is that of supreme authority and most elevated dignity. In that state "he sits," by which his continuance in it is evidently represented. But as this is the posture only of Him, who is "King of kings, and Lord of lords," the words may also be intended to suggest the idea of his sovereign greatness.

If it be said, that Stephen, when he beheld "the heavens opened," saw Jesus "STANDING on the right hand of God *," it is replied, that the Saviour might probably, on that solemn occasion, "appear standing to Stephen, as ready to assist him, as ready to plead for him, as ready to receive him †."

We enquire further, What is the grand distinction, what the peculiar employment, of Jesus in his exaltation? This is an interesting subject; but it involves so many things, which are too high for us,

* Acts vii. 56.

† Bp. Pearson on the Creed.

that "we cannot order our speech by reason of darkness." Yet we may advance a little. It is clearly declared, that he is the object of worship to all the celestial host: they fall upon their faces before his throne, with profound adoration. We need not fear, then, to imitate their example, or to ascribe to him "the kingdom, the power, and the glory." O that all the inhabitants of the earth may be filled with admiration of his divine perfections, and join with the angelic choir in singing, "Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth *."

The attention of Jesus is not confined to heaven: still "his delights are with the sons of men †." His heart is fixed on accomplishing the work of love, for which he assumed our nature. His Church is the object of his care: for its enlargement, protection, and prosperity, he is anxious; and he will continue to manage its concerns till the consummation of all things, when the grand scheme will be completed. If we belong to this favoured society, we shall have business of importance to transact with him every day. The great art of the Christian life is to maintain suitable affections towards this exalted Personage, who "sitteth on the right hand of God." For this purpose, we should remember,

1. He is our High Priest. As such, he undertook to expiate our guilt by his atoning sacrifice, and procure us free access unto the Father by the prevalence of his intercession. The Jewish high priests were types of Jesus. As they went within the veil

* Rev. xix. 6.

† Prov. viii. 31.

of the temple before the mercy-seat, on behalf of the people, and were required to present there the blood of various offerings; so Jesus hath "entered into the holy place by his own blood *." He has no need to repeat the oblation, which he made; but he pleads its efficacy, and prays, that as many as believe, in the utmost parts of the earth, and to the end of time, may receive all its benefits. The voice of the prophets and apostles is full and loud on this subject. He, in particular, whose pen was most employed for the defence and promulgation of the Gospel, has left a record, which affords the strongest proofs and clearest illustrations of the Saviour's sacerdotal character †.

In what manner his mediation in heaven is conducted, we do not pretend to explain. He asks, he claims, the blessings, for which he died; he exhibits his crucified body, as an offering, and "a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour ‡." A consideration this, which must prevail: and let us rejoice, that it is urged in behalf of all those, who by faith call upon his name.

The description is a little varied, when Jesus is spoken of as our Advocate; for this representation refers to judicial proceedings. We are summoned to appear in court, and arraigned before the supreme tribunal. We are put upon our trial, and found guilty. What, then, shall prevent our condemnation, and the execution of the sentence? Jesus undertakes our cause, and offers a plea in our favour, alleging what

* Heb. ix. 12.

† St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews.

‡ Eph. v. 2.

he himself endured on the cross. Thus the arm of justice, ready to fall upon us, is arrested; and pardon, peace, and salvation, are procured.

We shall never perceive any value or suitableness in the character, of the Saviour, as here given, till we are deeply impressed with a sense of our guilt and convinced of our unfitness to stand before the holy Lord God. If, however, we are thus touched with shame and fear, we shall rejoice in having such an One to mediate for us, through whom we may be confident of obtaining acceptance. This will encourage us to say both to ourselves and our fellow-sinners, "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus,—and having an High Priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith*." We may defy every enemy, and challenge every accuser, depending on the gracious interposition of our Redeemer. "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us†."

2. He is our great Benefactor, the source of all spiritual blessings, "the author and finisher of our faith." He sits upon a throne of grace, and exercises the most enlarged munificence. When he "ascended on high," he "received gifts for men‡," the abundant influences of the Holy Spirit, which would not otherwise have been communicated to us. These

* Heb. x. 19—22. † Rom. viii. 33, 34. ‡ Psal. lxxviii. 18.

were bestowed on the Apostles in an extraordinary measure: but, in every age of the Church, all the light, strength, and comfort, which any of his people possess, are derived from him. For “unto every one of us is given grace, according to the measure of the gift of Christ *.” He is the vine, we are the branches †; and therefore he alone can minister nourishment, for the purposes of our spiritual support, growth, and fruitfulness. He is the head, we are the members ‡; and therefore to him we must look for guidance, vigour, and protection. His faithful followers will all join their grateful attestations, and say, “Of his fulness have all we received §.” O let us love, and praise, and serve him, with our warmest affections! “Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation ||.” Those only can treat his character with contempt or indifference, who suppose that they are “rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and know not, that they are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked †.”

3. He is our King. To establish a government in the world, was the great object of his incarnation. Yet he appeared in a state of extreme weakness, and was treated with scornful insolence. How different his situation now! “All power is given unto him in heaven and in earth **.” He reigns enthroned in glorious majesty, “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name

* Eph. iv. 7. † John xv. 5. ‡ Col. ii. 19. § John i. 16.

|| Psal. lxxiii. 19. † Rev. iii. 17. ** Matt. xxviii. 18.

that

that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come *." The administration of the affairs of universal nature is committed to Jesus. The dispensations of providence are all ordered according to his sovereign pleasure. But the principal consideration is, that he continues to carry on the plan for establishing a kingdom of grace among men.

The human race are universally engaged in a system of rebellion against Heaven. Jesus sends to entreat their submission, and persuade them to lay down their arms. His ministers are continually calling to sinners in his name, "Be ye reconciled to God †;" and those, to whom the Gospel proves effectual, are "made willing in the day of his power ‡." Then they are ashamed of their past opposition, and yield themselves with unfeigned subjection to his disposal. They acknowledge the justice of his claims to their obedience, approve of his laws as "holy, just, and good," and promise to regulate their conduct by a regard to his will. These are his "peculiar people," rescued from the tyranny of Satan, and translated into the kingdom of Jesus §.

Happy, happy those, who thus resign themselves to the government of "the Prince of peace!" Like a gracious sovereign, he dispenses to them a free pardon, without any exception of persons, he receives them under his care, provides for all their necessities, and defends them from all hostile assaults. In consequence of their fidelity to him, they will be attacked by various enemies; and their conflict may

* Eph. i. 21. † 2 Cor. v. 20. ‡ Psal. cx. 3. § Col. i. 13.

be sharp. But, as they fight under his banner, he will secure to them the final conquest, and not suffer himself to be deprived of the meanest of his faithful subjects. You, therefore, who have vowed allegiance, be of good courage, trust and rejoice in his power, truth, and love.

“He must reign till he hath put all enemies under his feet*.” This expression is taken from the custom of ancient warriors, who, exulting over their vanquished adversaries, commanded them to be led in chains, and then trode upon their necks†. Thus will Jesus triumph in the end, and prove the completeness of his victory. All opposition to his grand design shall be entirely subdued. The contest, which his people maintain against Satan, shall soon be concluded to their honour and unspeakable felicity‡. Their inward depravity, that “body of death,” under which they groan, shall be purged away, and its painful assaults experienced no more for ever§. Death, also, the last of their enemies, shall be finally destroyed||. While their bodies are confined in the grave, they appear to be under its dominion; but Jesus has pledged himself for their rescue. He will raise them from the dust, and clothe them with immortality. “Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory‡.

As many as refuse submission to his government, shall display his power and justice in their everlasting pu-

* 1 Cor. xv. 25.

† Josh. x. 24.

‡ Rom. xvi. 20.

§ vii. 24, 25.

|| 1 Cor. xv. 26.

‡ 1 Cor. xv. 54.

nishment. "As the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers *." Thus even the wretched inhabitants of hell will remain an eternal monument of the absolute and uncontrollable dominion of Jesus. The very Devils shall feel the weight of his arm, and receive an increase of torment for their opposition to his kingdom. It is his determination "to subdue all things unto himself:" and therefore it will be our wisdom, as it is our bounden duty, to bow to his sceptre, and live in cheerful obedience to his precepts. O "kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little! Blessed are all they, that put their trust in him †."

* Rev. ii. 27.

† Psalm ii. 12.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 45.

Jesus will return in his glory—judge the world with righteousness—and then resign his mediatorial kingdom.

JESUS, who ascended into heaven, and now sitteth at the right hand of God, is occupied in carrying on, from age to age, a plan of extensive mercy; a plan, of which we can form no adequate conceptions, but which, even from our present imperfect views, should excite us continually to the exercise of holy admiration, gratitude, and love. This plan will soon be completed, and we shall be called upon to contemplate it in its various parts, with a degree of light and information, which we are now incapable of receiving.

We forbear to enlarge upon the grand scheme of providence, by which the government of Jesus will be supported and advanced, till all opposition be subdued, and his empire be universal. Suffice it to observe, that, “the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ*.” We forbear to enquire, what will be the state of things at that glorious period, when Jesus, together with his saints,

* Rev. xi. 15.

shall reign upon the earth for a thousand years *. Let us endeavour to look beyond all the transactions, which are yet to take place in the present system, to the solemn close and final consummation. Let us direct our attention to the second advent of our Redeemer, the conflagration of this terrestrial globe, the general resurrection, the universal judgment, and the appointment of men to heaven or to hell, according to their characters. What awful subjects are these! Who can read or think of them, without the most serious impressions and earnest prayers? "O Lord Jesus Christ, grant that at thy second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight †!"

Jesus is already possessed of unspeakable glory, being exalted "far above all principality and power," and worshipped by the Angels, which surround his throne. But we have remarked, that, though he be "Lord of all," his majesty is not yet publicly exhibited on earth. At his promised return, however, his triumph will be celebrated, and his dignity universally acknowledged. The holy scriptures make frequent mention of that season. It is called "the great day," for the events of every other are comparatively trifling. It is "the day of God," because Jehovah will no longer leave sinners to their own ways, but vindicate his sovereign authority. It is "the day of Christ," since his character will then be displayed: "his enemies shall lick the dust ‡:"

* Rev. xx. 6.

† Collect for the third Sunday in Advent.

‡ Psal. lxxii. 9.

“ every knee shall bow at his name, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father *.”

This, therefore, is styled “ the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ †.” The descriptions of it are the most august and exalted, which can be conceived. Language fails to give us any adequate ideas of the divine majesty, which will then be exhibited in the person of Jesus Christ. Moses could not behold the brightness of his presence upon mount Sinai: but his manifestation, at the last day, will be inconceivably more splendid and magnificent. Thus he himself speaks of it: “ The Son of man shall come in the clouds of heaven, in his glory, and in the glory of his Father, and all the holy Angels with him: then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory; and before him shall be gathered all nations ‡.” Such, also, are the declarations of his Apostles, “ The Lord shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel, and with the trump of God.” “ Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen §.”

What a grandeur will be displayed in his retinue! The celestial world shall pour forth its inhabitants, to accompany their King; and, from the number and splendour of his attendants, we shall then be convinced of the greatness of his majesty. Those “ ministering

* Phil. ii. 10, 11. † Tit. ii. 13. ‡ Matt. xvi. 27. xxiv. 30.
xxv. 31, 32. § 1 Thess. iv. 16. Rev. i. 7.

spirits," who are as "a flaming fire," surpass in strength and brightness all the conceptions we can form. Even one of this host has been enough to confound some of the most holy men upon earth. What an appearance, then, will be exhibited by the thousands and millions, who shall grace the triumph of the Saviour! "They do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word*." By his direction they will proclaim the summons for all mankind to stand before him. "He shall send his Angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect†." "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,—the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised‡." "All that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth, they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation§." "The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also, and the works that are therein, shall be burned up||." "A great white throne" appears, and "the Ancient of days" sits upon it, "from whose face the earth and the heaven fly away, and there is found no place for them. The dead, small and great, stand before God, and the books are opened‡."

Thus all, in that numerous assembly, shall be witnesses of the honour of Christ; but with how different affections will they meet him! There are those, who, with holy exultation, will then sing,

* Psal. ciii. 20. † Matt. xxiv. 31. ‡ 1 Cor. xv. 52. § John v. 28, 29. || 2 Pet. iii. 10. † Dan. vii. 9, 10. Rev. xx. 11, 12.

“Lo! this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad, and rejoice in his salvation*.” Others, confounded and terrified at his presence, shall say to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand †.”

The Lord Jesus, then, at his glorious advent, will proceed “to judge the world with righteousness ‡.” To this high office he is expressly appointed by the Covenant. It is committed to him, in order that the dignity of his character may appear; “that all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father §.” It properly belongs to him, as the sovereign, universal King. Judgment, being a part of executive government, appertains to majesty; and, therefore, Jesus, who is “Lord of all,” possesses the right of exercising judicature over the subjects of his dominion.

It will be one of the important objects of that day, to exhibit the perfections of God, which are now obscured, and to vindicate his present dispensations, the equity and wisdom of which are frequently disputed and denied. Such is his amazing condescension, that he will submit his general proceedings to our inspection, and call on us to declare our approbation. The reasons of his dealings with

* Isa. xxv. 9.

† Rev. vi. 16, 17.

‡ Psal xcvi. 13.

§ John v. 23.

us in' this world are often concealed. "His way is in the sea, and his path in the great waters, and his footsteps are not known *." We foolishly presume to speculate, cavil; and find fault; when we ought to acquiesce, with patience and thankfulness, in his disposal. We may consider him, as saying to each one of us, "What I do, thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter †." Every thing, even then, may not be perfectly explained; but so much, at least, of the divine conduct will be laid before us, as to convince us, that in all its parts it has uniformly been "holy, and just, and good." *It is expressly asserted, That will be "the day of revelation of the righteous judgment of God ‡." Under dark dispensations, therefore, when our minds are perplexed with doubts and fears, let us learn to wait for clearer information. Our difficulties will soon be removed, and our objections answered. The severest calamities, which believers endure, will appear to have been appointed in wisdom, faithfulness, and love. They will all with one voice cry out, "Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints §!"

Another purpose to be effected in the judgment, and what our plan leads us chiefly to insist on, is, the manifestation of the wonderful scheme of redemption, in its various connections and dependencies, and the public display of the dignity, the work, and offices of the Saviour. Jesus will then be acknowledged,

* Psal. lxxvii. 19.

† John xiii 7.

‡ Rom. ii. 5.

§ Rev. xv. 3.

“over all, God blessed for ever*.” Indeed the perfections, which he must necessarily possess, as supreme and universal Judge, evidently prove, that he is superior to the most exalted creatures. At the same time, the contrast will be most astonishing, when his humiliation and grace are viewed in conjunction with his glory. He will be seen, not only as “King of kings, and Lord of lords,” but as “the Lamb, that was slain:” nor will he be ashamed to bear the marks of his sufferings. His body still retains the print of the nails in his hands and feet, and the hole in his pierced side, as the memorials of his crucifixion.

The nature and consequences of the trial, which will then be instituted, and the qualifications of Jesus for his high function, will appear from the following considerations. •

1. He is wise. A clear discernment of the demands of the law, and of the different cases of the persons arraigned, is of peculiar importance in a judge: and this is what Jesus possesses without any defect. He cannot be ignorant of the rule of duty, which he himself came to enforce and explain; nor can he possibly be mistaken in the characters or conduct of those, who are summoned before him. Every disguise, which might blind the eyes of men, is removed in his presence. No vain pretences, however specious, can deceive him; no false attestations obtain credit at his bar: for “He searcheth the reins and hearts†.” He may be pleased to admit the testimony of others, yet he stands in no need of their

* Rom. ix. 5.

† Rev. ii. 23.

information.

information. He might convict or acquit, on the ground of his own unerring observation; every secret thing is noted down in his book, and he knows "every man's work, of what sort it is." How different are human courts of judicature, where the evidence may be so defective, or such shameful impositions practised, that the guilty may escape, and the innocent suffer!

It will be allowed, that judgment properly belongs to Jesus, if we observe,

2. He is just. However clearly men understand the cases, which are submitted to their decision, they may determine under the influence of corrupt motives, so as to "condemn the innocent blood," and "accept the persons of the wicked*." But it is not possible, that Jesus should feel any prejudice or partiality, or be misled by wrong affections. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right †?" "Justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne ‡." He is "Faithful and true, and in righteousness he doth judge §." "There is no respect of persons with him ||." Accordingly, in classing the numerous assembly at his tribunal, he pays no regard to any other consideration than that of their characters. For "he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left †."

A different sentence awaits these different descriptions of men; but, even in that decision, he will manifest his own holiness, truth, and equity. He

* Psal. lxxxii. 2. xciv. 21. † Gen. xviii. 25. ‡ Psal. lxxxix. 14.

§ Rev. xix. 11. || Rom. ii. 11. † Matt. xxv. 32, 33.

will condescend to declare the reasons, for which he admits some to his blissful presence in heaven, and dooms others to a state of everlasting punishment. Such as have believed in his name, are completely justified through his obedience; yet he will prove, that they are saved consistently with his eternal love of righteousness. It will appear, that they were renewed after his image "through sanctification of the Spirit," and that they had evinced the change by their habitual regard to his will, and by their pious labours. He will, therefore, produce their good works for his own glory, as well as the vindication of their characters. The impenitent will be confounded by the horrors of an accusing conscience, and by the sight of the Judge, who is privy to all their secret transactions of iniquity, and malignant dispositions. But he will, also, demonstrate the justice of their condemnation before the assembled universe, by publicly exhibiting their evil deeds, their neglect and contempt of every thing truly excellent.* So that, however tremendous that state may be, to which they are appointed, none will presume to say, "My punishment is greater than I deserve."

We consider, further, the qualifications of Jesus for his office, while we observe

3. He is powerful. The whole proceedings of our courts of judicature would be trifling and absurd, if the judge possessed no authority to execute his sentence. The Lord Christ bears the sword: He is "the Almighty *;" "Strong is his hand, and high

* Rev. i. 8,

is his right hand*.” Whoever may be disposed to arraign of the equity of his decision, it must be carried into effect. What his lips* pronounce, he will instantly perform. Vain would be all resistance: for who shall dare to contend with Him? The gates of heaven shall be opened at his command, and admit his redeemed people: not one; of that society, can possibly be excluded. If he should say to us, “Enter ye into the joy of your Lord,” the united force of the whole creation would be unable to prevent it. His word, also, will be with power, when he shall utter that tremendous doom, “Depart from me, ye cursed.” Do any complain, or refuse to obey? Alas! to what purpose? The mandate is irresistible; it is enforced by omnipotence. Whoever, therefore, may wish or attempt to evade the sentence, it must take place. The wicked “shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power †.”

Whilst we allow and maintain, that it is the prerogative of Jesus to execute judgment, let us not forget that “every one of us must give account of himself to Him ‡.” With all seriousness and diligence, let us “prepare to meet our God §.” Let us dwell upon the awful subject, that it may leave a deeper impression upon our minds.

This judgment will be universal, as extending to the whole rational creation. The holy Angels will be interested, but we presume not to explain in what

* Psal. lxxxix. 13.

† 2 Thess. i. 9.

‡ Rom. xiv. 12.

§ Amos iv. 12.

particular manner. They will be gathered together, so as to become one body in Christ with all his saints, perfectly united under Him, and, probably, confirmed and secured in their happy and glorious state for ever *. The fallen spirits will be brought forth for public trial and condemnation. They are "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day †." The baseness of their character, and especially their malignant opposition to Christ and his people, will then be manifested; and they will be consigned, on the clearest grounds of equity, to those mansions of horror and despair, where "there shall be weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth."

But the proceedings of that day are described, as having a peculiar reference to our world: and it is a consideration of the utmost moment to ourselves, that every individual of the human race will be summoned. "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ ‡." What an immense concourse! It must baffle our calculations. Adam, and his numerous progeny, even to his latest descendant, must stand together at the tribunal; nor will any one in that vast assembly pass unnoticed. How awful the thought! Each person will be examined with the same strictness and attention, as if no other were present, and feel himself not less interested, than if his own were the only case to be determined.

This judgment, then, will be particular, as extending to the minutest circumstance of our lives. The accuracy of such an investigation may justly excite the

* Eph. i. 10. Col. i. 20. † Jude 6. ‡ 2 Cor. v. 10.

most serious apprehensions. Who can endure it? The whole of our actions will come under a close inspection: Yes, even those, which were carefully concealed from the observation of our fellow creatures upon earth, shall then be publicly exposed. For "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil *." It should be remembered, also, that the intercourse, we have had with each other in conversation, will be scrutinized with the same exactness. "Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment †." Nay further, Jesus, who searcheth the reins, takes notice of the thoughts, affections, desires, plans, and purposes, which have never appeared in outward effects. He declares, "There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known ‡." Considering, then, "with whom we have to do," let us not content ourselves with mere regularity, or an external decency of conduct. Can we bear to have all our imaginations, wishes, and schemes, unfolded to the view of the assembled world? Does not the very apprehension of it cover us with confusion; especially as the event of the trial is so momentous?

This judgment is final. The eternal states of all mankind will be decided beyond the possibility of a change. There can lie no appeal to any other tribunal. It is the defect of human judicatories, that they frequently find it necessary or expedient to reverse the

* Eccles. xii. 14.

† Matt. xii. 36.

‡ x. 26.

sentence,

sentence, which they have passed. But reasons of policy or mere compassion, which arise from our ignorance and weakness, cannot influence the proceedings of the court of heaven. No pardon, no mitigation of the doom, can be obtained for impenitent sinners, who shall be condemned by the righteous Judge of all. When he shall say to his redeemed people, "Come, ye blessed children of my Father," they will have no reason to dread an alteration in his dispositions, or a diminution of their happiness. No further probation will be appointed: but, the day of grace being closed, all mankind will be consigned to a state of bliss or misery, and that for ever. The great gulf will be fixed, so that it will be impossible to pass from one to the other *. Ah! where shall we dwell?

It remains only that we enquire briefly, what shall follow the solemn transactions of the last day; and this subject will conclude our observations on the character of Jesus. "Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule, and all authority, and power: for he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet †." The important work, which he undertook, will be completed; his people brought home, and placed in full possession of the inheritance prepared for them, and all the opposers of his government entirely confounded and vanquished. There will, therefore, be no further occasion for the offices of Mediator, Advocate, and Intercessor: the grand intention, for which they were first

* Luke xvi. 26.

† 1 Cor. xv. 24, 25.

assumed, will then be accomplished; and, the salvation being finished, they will cease. The dominion, now vested in the hands of Jesus for the attainment of a peculiar purpose, shall be again delivered to the Godhead, in the person of the Father. The kingdom, which we call mediatorial, shall be resigned: the trust, being discharged, shall be given up.

The people of Christ, who are the objects of his care, shall possess such a perfection of purity, that his gracious agency, in representing them before the throne, will be no longer necessary. In this life, we look to the Father, and he to us, only through the interposition of the Redeemer. But in heaven there will be this grand difference: we shall come to God, as it were immediately, like the blessed Angels, who stand in no need of one to introduce or plead for them. Thus * all things being subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto Him, that put all things under him, that God may be all in all *." Jesus, as Mediator, shall retire, acknowledging that the peculiar authority, which he possesses in that office, had been delegated: the glory of the Deity shall be seen without a veil; all worship and adoration shall be ascribed to Jehovah; and universal, absolute dominion be maintained by him alone for ever.

This is confessed to be a mysterious subject; but the difficulty arises from our inability to form clear and suitable conceptions of the divine essence, and of that union of the two natures, which subsists in the person of Jesus Christ. "We cannot order our

* 1 Cor. xv. 28.

speech by reason of darkness * :” but let us wait awhile, and the day will declare, what we presume not to explain.

No argument can properly be drawn from the resignation of the Redeemer’s kingdom, to disprove his Godhead, or original equality with the Father. This surrender, we have observed, refers to the trust invested in him as Mediator ; and in that capacity, it is allowed, he is subject. But it has appeared, through the consideration of his whole character, that he possesses all the glories and perfections, which we can possibly ascribe to Deity. These he cannot deliver up ; and therefore as God, he together with the Father and the Holy Ghost, the one self-existent Jehovah, shall reign for ever and ever ; “ and of his kingdom there shall be no end † .”

He will, likewise, continue to enjoy throughout eternity a peculiar honour, even in his human nature. He will still be distinguished as “ Immanuel,” though not as Mediator. He will remain the Head of his people, and they will be considered as in Him, standing before God only by virtue of his blood, and his obedience unto death. The throne of the Lamb, as well as of the Lord God, shall be in the new Jerusalem, and his servants shall serve him ‡ . “ The Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne, shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters § .” Thus “ his name shall endure for ever || .” The very man of Nazareth, who was crucified on mount Cal-

* Job xxxvii. 19. † Luke i. 33. ‡ Rev. xxii. 3. § vii. 17.

|| Psal. lxxii. 17.

vary, shall possess a state of glorious exaltation, even when the plan of redemption is completed, and shall be the object of everlasting admiration, love, and praise, amongst all the hosts of heaven.

Do not our hearts burn with strong desires to participate of their bliss, and join in their song? Then let us acquaint ourselves with the character of Jesus; for “no man cometh unto the Father but by Him *.” Let us pray, that we may have clearer and more enlarged conceptions of his worth and excellency: for how small a part do we yet perceive! Indeed, in our highest state of advancement upon earth, our views will be obscure and contracted. O! what rich discoveries are reserved for the eternal world, to which we are hastening! Do we not exult in the confidence, that the veil will be soon removed, and we shall “see the King in his beauty?” Then shall we cry out, with holy transport, as the queen of Sheba, “Behold, the half was not told me †.” But, from the little which we now understand; may we be excited to love him with our warmest affections, and serve him with unwearied vigour and delight, till we be admitted into his beatific presence, to reign with him in glory, as kings and priests, for ever and ever! Amen.

HALLELUJAH!

* John xiv. 6.

† 1 Kings x. 7.

THE VIRGIN MARY.

CHAP. III.

Mary, descended from David—espoused to Joseph—informed of her miraculous conception—visited Elizabeth—brought forth Jesus at Bethlehem—attended at the temple for her purification—went into Egypt—expostulated with Jesus, for remaining at Jerusalem—met with a rebuke from him at Cana—accompanied him in his ministry—stood by his cross.

AFTER considering the life of the Redeemer, we may be disposed to treat with indifference every other history, as being, comparatively, of little importance. But, as in the natural world, though we look not immediately to the sun, we behold the effects of his light in the brightness of every object around us; so we may discover the grace and glory of Jesus in those whom he illuminates, and, from the view of their excellencies, may be led to regard him with the greater admiration.

We now direct our meditations to the character of the person, to whom he stood most nearly related in the flesh. We contemplate his virgin mother, who was not only “blessed among women,” but honoured above all the crowned heads, which were ever distinguished on the earth. We cannot, indeed, in speak-

ing concerning her, accommodate ourselves to the superstition of Romish devotees. They dare to address her in foolish and idolatrous language, as if she had the disposal of all spiritual blessings, and even in heaven could command her Son, upon the throne of his glory, to answer their petitions. It is said, that they offer as many prayers, if such they may be called, to the holy virgin, as to the Lord God Almighty. Abhorred be this worship of a creature!

Nor do we attend to any absurd traditional legends, but enquire merely, what we may learn from her example, as recorded in the scriptures. A very short account is given us: perhaps, this circumstance was designed to check our vain curiosity, which might lead us to propose many unprofitable questions. We know nothing of her parentage, except that she proceeded in a direct line from David: otherwise she could not have been the mother of the promised Messiah. It appears, however, by numerous proofs, that her situation in life was obscure, though she obtained the high honour of introducing the Saviour into the world, that peculiar honour, to which the holy women of old most eagerly aspired.

It had been foretold, that the Redeemer should not only assume our nature, and spring from the royal family of David, in some of its reduced branches, but be born of a pure virgin*. These predictions were exactly fulfilled. The genealogy of Mary is carefully preserved, in order to shew her regular descent from David: and so low had that illustrious house then

* Gen. iii. 15. Psal. cxviii. 11. Isa. xi. 1. vii. 14.

sunk, that she was in a very mean condition, espoused to Joseph, a poor carpenter, who was himself also of the same extraction. She still remained immaculate, though betrothed. The marriage was not consummated, when she was acquainted with the gracious designs of heaven.

The Angel Gabriel carried her the information, that the Lord God looked upon her with a special regard, and designed to distinguish her above her sex *. This extraordinary appearance and salutation excited astonishment and confusion in her mind. He, however, dispersed her fears, and encouraged her faith, while he proceeded to assure her, that she should be favoured of God in conceiving and bringing forth a Son, even the divine Redeemer, who should establish the promised kingdom of grace in the world. Mary expressed a holy admiration at the message delivered, and yet objected her own virginity, which seemed inconsistent with such an intention. The Angel then declared explicitly, that the conception should be effected, not in a natural way, but by the immediate operation of the Holy Ghost. He observed further, that her cousin Elizabeth was in a state of pregnancy at that very time, through a miraculous influence, and referred her to the Almighty power of God, which can instantly remove every difficulty, and accomplish those purposes, which we may conclude to be impossible. Mary presumed not to dispute with the heavenly visitor, and replied only by testifying her humble and devout acquiescence in the Lord's appointment. She

* Luke i. 26—38.

resigned herself to the disposal of God, desiring that she might be subservient to his will.

What an amiable pattern of meekness, faith, and submission, is here exhibited! She credited the divine message, and expected the completion of the promise, in this confidence, that God can do every thing, and will surely perform what he has said. Have we learned, in like manner, to cease from our vain objections, and depend upon his declarations with unfeigned simplicity? With what reluctance do we rest upon the word, which he has spoken; and with what petulance do we demand an explanation! The many curious questions we propose, and the foolish cavils we raise, prove to our shame, that we are "slow of heart to believe."

Though the honour, conferred upon the pious virgin was great, she was called by the miraculous conception to a peculiar measure of patience and resignation. According to human probabilities, it seemed likely to expose her to severe trials and dangers. What could she expect, when her pregnancy appeared, but to be separated from the man, to whom she was espoused? What, but to be reproached, perhaps condemned to die, as a base adulteress*? Yet she cheerfully submitted the event to God, and trusted him with the care of her character and life. Ah! how few possess such a disposition! How few are willing to acquiesce in those dispensations, or engage in those services, which may bring them into difficulties? Let us enquire, whether we can say sincerely, and without re-

* Deut. xxii. 23, 24.

serve, in whatever way God is pleased to intimate his pleasure, "Be it unto me, according to thy word."

Soon after the conception, Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, whose case had been mentioned by Gabriel *. This long journey was undertaken, with the view, probably, of receiving a confirmation of her faith, by a free communication with her devout relatives. Here we are admitted to a delightful interview between two affectionate and pious women, whose conversation will suggest some profitable instructions. They were both filled with the Holy Ghost, and spake in the most rapturous and elevated manner, praising God and comforting one another. Elizabeth received her with joy, congratulated her as favoured above her sex, and accounted herself highly honoured in entertaining such a guest.

Mary seemed to be overpowered with admiration of the divine goodness, and broke forth into expressions of liveliest gratitude, and adoration. Her song, evidently dictated by inspiration, bears a striking resemblance to that of Hannah. In the comparison we see the same feelings, the same acknowledgment of a more than common blessing, of honour conferred on the unworthy, of unexpected grace and favour. Let us endeavour to study this animated passage, till we feel something of Mary's devout and ardent affections, and each be constrained to cry out for himself, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." GOD MY SA-

* Luke i. 39—56.

VIOLUR,—how astonishing, how delightful the mystery ! She exulted in the hope of obtaining redemption through the incarnation of this divine Personage, more than in being his mother according to the flesh. She declared, indeed, her wonder and thankfulness for the honourable office, to which she was appointed by the high and lofty One, whose name is holy ; and then proceeded, from the consideration of her own state, to observe, that it is God's general plan, both in his providence and grace, to exalt the lowly and abase the proud, so that none may glory in his presence. She concluded, as she began, with admiring and praising him for that grand scheme of salvation, which he was about to accomplish in remembrance of his mercy, and in performance of his promises to the ancient fathers.

Let us call upon ourselves to bless the Lord for his goodness ; for how great things has he done for us ! We should adore him, particularly, for the gift of his dear Son ; the unspeakable benefit being designed to extend unto us as well as unto Mary. But who feels any warmth of gratitude on this account ? Are we properly aware of the advantages, which Jesus came to bestow ? If not, how shall we “ magnify the Lord ? ” Nay, may not those, who are the favoured objects of his grace, be justly ashamed of their stupor and insensibility, even while they are taking the words of thanksgiving into their mouths ?

Mary continued with Elizabeth three months, and then returned to her accustomed residence at Nazareth. Her situation, upon its discovery, must have exposed

exposed her to many ignominious censures, had not Joseph, to whom she was betrothed, been directed by a message from heaven to receive her for his wife *. He complied immediately, believing the account of the miraculous conception, and, probably on that ground, abstained from all knowledge of her, till the birth of her illustrious Son.

When the time of her delivery drew near, both she and her husband removed to Bethlehem, where the inheritance of their ancestors formerly lay. An express prophecy required, that the Saviour should be born there †, yet they had not contrived the journey, with any intent to fulfil the scripture: they were called thither by the command of the Roman Emperor, for the purpose of a general enrolment ‡. In that event we perceive and admire the over-ruling hand of God, who can accomplish his own designs by means the most improbable. It was so ordered, therefore, that, during their continuance in that town, Mary brought forth her child. And in what circumstances of meanness and distress! She had no friend to receive or attend her, and not only was obliged to solicit accommodations at an inn, but, while others obtained a preference, she was too poor and inconsiderable to gain admission into the house. She took up her abode in the stable, and there, without assistance or any comfortable conveniences, endured the pains of labour. But she was miraculously strengthened for the difficulties of her situation; inso-much that she herself performed the necessary offices

* Matt. i. 18—25. † Mic. v. 2. ‡ Luke ii. 1—7.

for her new-born Son: "she wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger."

While we contemplate the situation of Mary, the mother of the Saviour, we learn never to look upon a state of indigence with contempt. Let not the great and opulent boast of the grandeur of their houses, furniture, or retinue; nor let the most necessitous complain of their mean accommodations. We perceive, that some of those, who have possessed the highest excellency of character, and whom God hath most honourably distinguished, were placed in obscurity, and often suffered the deepest distress. This should abase the pride of the rich, and draw forth thankfulness and praise from those, who are in the straits of poverty.

It should seem, that Mary was of a contemplative disposition. When she had received the account of the shepherds, to whom the nativity of Immanuel was announced by a messenger from heaven, she "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart*." And, while she endeavoured to derive spiritual improvement from an attentive regard to these extraordinary occurrences, doubtless her faith and hope, her gratitude and love, were enlivened and increased. Thus, also, it is incumbent upon us to treasure up in our minds the declarations of God's word, and the dispensations of his providence, which will furnish us with matter for devout and profitable meditation. Is this what we practise? Are we not strangers to religious retirement, examination, and recollection? And is it not owing to our levity and

* Luke ii. 19.

diffipation,

dissipation, that we make little or no advancement in divine knowledge and holy principles?

After forty days Mary appeared in the temple at Jerusalem, with her infant Son, desirous to yield a punctual compliance with all sacred institutions*. She came to present her first-born to the Lord, that he might be consecrated and redeemed; according to the express injunctions of the law †. She came, also, for her own purification, and offered the sacrifices appointed for that purpose; one, as a tribute of gratitude for safe delivery, and the other, as an acknowledgment of sinfulness. But so low was her rank in life, that she could make only such oblations, as were admitted in case of great poverty ‡. Let not an attention to the outward rites of religion be censured and condemned as superstition: it is indispensably requisite, and perfectly rational. But alas! our age is marked by its bold contempt of divine ordinances. "Will a man rob God?" This is indeed a robbery of the most audacious kind, yet not unfrequent. How many resist the express claims of Jehovah, and refuse the service which He requires! But let these arrogant despisers of the laws of the Almighty know, that he will reckon with them for presumptuously denying or withholding his just demands.

At the presentation of the infant Saviour in the temple, the aged Simeon delivered a remarkable prophecy. The pious mother and her husband stood with devout astonishment to hear the words, and re-

* Luke ii. 22—39.

† Exod. xiii. 2. Numb. xviii. 15, 16.

‡ Lev. xii. 6—8.

ceive the benediction of that venerable saint. But Mary was warned, that her honour, in bearing so illustrious a Son, would be accompanied with painful trials, and her joy imbibited by a participation of his extreme afflictions. "A sword," said Simeon, "shall pierce through thy own soul." This, doubtless, was exactly fulfilled: so that, considering her tenderness of affection and quick sensibility, we may conclude that her relation to Jesus was the cause of inconceivable anguish to her mind. Such, in general, are all earthly advantages. They excite the envy of others, but produce very sharp distress to the possessors. O! be not anxious to obtain, and be afraid of valuing too highly, any temporal distinctions or enjoyments! That which is the object of your desires, may be as a sword to pierce your souls.

Mary's troubles soon commenced. She saw, indeed, the wise men from a distant country pay their adorations to the child upon her breast*, expressly acknowledging his high dignity. But she was immediately obliged to fly for his preservation. The tyrant Herod sought his destruction; and, to avoid his murderous jealousy, the holy family were directed by an Angel to retire into Egypt. So long and tedious a journey, in those circumstances of poverty and danger, must have been extremely painful. On this occasion, Mary stood in peculiar need of faith and patience. Egypt, however, the very country in which Israel had been oppressed, now offered a refuge and a hiding-place to Israel's Redeemer. In due time, the death of the

* Matt. ii. 11—23.

furious persecutor being annointed, Mary, with her little household, was conducted from Egypt, under the immediate care of Heaven, and again settled at her own city Nazareth.

We, also, may be situated in the midst of great perils, and, required to quit our accustomed residence, may feel the severe pang of hitherto unknown distress. But if we move in the path of duty, and go forth at the call of God, we may and should possess composure and confidence of mind. The Lord himself will be our guide and defence. Like Mary, we may be banished from the ordinances and people of God; yet, even then, He can support and comfort us, and abundantly compensate our loss by the rich communications of his Spirit. Let us wait his time, and follow his directions. He will deliver us, and call us out of exile to our home.

Mary continued to dwell at Nazareth with Joseph, in a mean and obscure condition. But such was her piety, that neither the expense nor the fatigue of so long a journey prevented her from attending the annual celebration of the passover in Jerusalem*. At the age of twelve years Jesus accompanied his parents to that festival: and on the conclusion of the sacred solemnity they departed without their Son. They advanced to some distance on the road, before they were apprized of his absence: they had supposed him to be with the rest of the company, amongst his relatives and acquaintance. On missing him, however, they returned to the city to seek him: and on the third day,

* Luke ii. 41—51.

after a painful search, they found him in the temple, in conference with the chief public teachers of religion. His mother expostulated with him on his conduct; and such were his answers, that her mind was deeply impressed by his words; she did not clearly understand them, but "she kept them in her heart." Learn, you, who have the care of families, to bring them with you to the house of God. Possibly, you may there receive the most serious and solemn instructions, which you do not comprehend. Yet presume not to reject or despise them: like Mary, keep them in your heart, till, by meditation and prayer, you obtain the knowledge of their important meaning.

When Jesus entered on his ministry, it is probable that his mother usually accompanied him, and that her husband Joseph was, then dead, as no further mention is made of him. Upon one occasion we find her, together with Jesus and his disciples, attending a marriage at Cana in Galilee*. Observing a deficiency of wine at the entertainment, she applied to her Son, having been a witness of his miracles in private, and expressed a wish, that he would exert his power to supply the want of the table. For that hasty proposal she met with a rebuke, though it was such, whatever the language may seem to us to import, as conveyed to the mother no mark of irreverence or disrespect. Jesus intimated, that it was not her part to dictate, at what time or in what manner his supernatural operations should be performed. But, if she had been rash in the suggestion, she discovered

* John ii. 1.—11.

an amiable meekness in submitting to the reproof, and a strength of faith, likewise, in still encouraging the expectation, that he would provide for the necessity.

We do not assert that she was a perfect character; and the incident, just mentioned, as well as other considerations, will serve to shew, the absurdity and impiety of the Church of Rome. The members of that communion address their prayers to the virgin, that she would interpose her authority, and command her Son. If she was wrong in attempting to direct his works upon earth, it is preposterous to imagine, that she should control the disposal of his blessings, now that he is exalted in glory. We rejoice, that we stand in no need of her intercession, since we are allowed a free access to the Saviour himself. Without applying to any creature for an introduction, we may go to him immediately, and confidently look for a favourable reception.

When Jesus removed to Capernaum, Mary continued with him*. It should seem, while he was preaching in that town or neighbourhood, surrounded by a large audience, she and some other of his near relations, apprehending danger, probably from the excess of his zeal or the designs of his enemies, wished to call him away from such a situation†. Being informed of their desire to speak to him, he took the opportunity of declaring before the people, that he felt no stronger attachment to his mother and brethren, merely as his natural kindred, than he did on a spiritual account to all his faithful and obedient disci-

* John ii. 12. † Matt. xii. 46—50.

ples. He meant not to slight so dear a parent, but to encourage and animate his followers by this lively expression of regard.

Mary appears to have valued his instructions, on which she constantly attended; and doubtless she had the same need, which we ourselves have, of his teaching and salvation. While, therefore, we observe her, like an humble scholar, sitting at his feet, we should learn not to despise the ministry of his word. None should willingly absent themselves, whatever be their superiority of wisdom, or attainments in piety. Though we are not favoured with his personal preaching, yet his own institutions are established among us, and in them we may expect the divine presence and blessing. O, why are we negligent, since the duty is indispensably required, and the advantages, promised to every believing worshipper, are great? Are we not desirous to obtain the tokens of his affectionate regard, and to be accounted as his brother, his sister, or his mother? We must remember, this high privilege is granted only to those, who wait upon him with unfeigned sincerity.

When our Lord celebrated his last passover at Jerusalem, Mary was his attendant; and, probably, was witness to all the ignominious treatment and excruciating tortures, which he there endured. On many preceding occasions, she must have experienced the most pungent distress, perceiving him to be so generally “despised and rejected of men.” But the view of his last sufferings must have been painful beyond measure. She saw Him, of whom the Angel
Gabriel

Gabriel had said to her, "He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end," bound as a prisoner, tried and condemned as an atrocious malefactor and impious blasphemer, exposed as a gazing-stock, to a profane mob, and nailed to the cross, there to languish and expire amidst the shouts and insults of an immense multitude of all ranks. We know not, what her conclusions were; but then, doubtless, she experienced the truth of Simeon's prophecy, and felt a sword piercing her very soul. Yet, though her grief was extreme, we read not that she staggered* through unbelief. At least she did not desert the dying Saviour; nay, she adhered to him at that season, when it must have been dangerous to avow an attachment. She heard the taunts and clamours of his enemies, yet she was found at the foot of the cross*.

Some comfort, however, was administered to her in that tremendous scene of woe. The gracious Redeemer, amidst all his pains, did not forget his bereaved mother. He looked upon her with the tenderest affection, and, having no worldly property to leave, consigned her to the care and protection of his beloved apostle. "Woman," said he, "behold thy son:" from that time she took up her abode with John, and, as if she had been his own mother, was treated with all filial regard. The scriptures have related nothing further of her history, except that she continued to associate with the disciples, after our Lord's ascension, and joined in their exercises

* John xix. 25-27.

of devotion *. It is thought, that she died in John's house at Ephesus, and it has been believed by some, that she suffered martyrdom for the faith of Jesus. But these, and other traditional accounts, are not to be depended on.

Of this there cannot remain a doubt, that she possessed an eminent degree of grace, and that, after enduring much for Him, who was her honoured Lord and Saviour as well as her dear Son, her soul was received up to his presence in heaven. There she now beholds his glory, in a brighter manner than she could have done upon earth, and there she will reign with him for ever. Yet to that blissful inheritance she is admitted, not as being the mother of Jesus, but on the very same grounds as the whole Church of God, being redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, and sanctified by the Holy Ghost. She will there rejoice in her spiritual union with Christ, more than in her natural relation to him, and esteem it a higher privilege to have known him by faith, than to have brought him forth into the world.

But, while we see that Mary was not ashamed or afraid to stand by the cross, let us enquire, Are we bold and steadfast in the cause of Jesus? Are we willing to hazard every thing for him? If we can indeed resign ourselves and our all to his disposal, he will provide for our temporal support, as he did for that of Mary. But ah! how few will profess an attachment to him, when it is likely to subject them to difficulties and dangers! We mourn for the

* Acts i. 14.

towardice and treachery of the thousands, who desert his service; and we warn all, who are called by his name, that, if they will not suffer with him, they shall not reign with him, and that, if they deny him, he also will deny them*.

There are those, perhaps, who express their admiration of the honour conferred upon the holy virgin, and say, as a certain woman did to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb, that bare thee, and the paps, which thou hast sucked †!" We would remind them of our Lord's reply upon that occasion, "Yea, rather blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it." To you, then, who hear his word, we propose the question, Do you keep it? Does it excite your serious attention, or retain a place in your remembrance? What is the value you put upon it; or the influence, which it produces? Does it regulate your practice, as well as enliven your hopes? Had not such been its effects with Mary, her case would have been wretched and desperate, notwithstanding all she had done or suffered for the Saviour.

It is far better, therefore, to possess a spiritual knowledge of Christ, and an obedient regard to him, than to stand the foremost among his natural kindred. You, who have believed in his name, are become the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty, and shortly will be admitted into the presence of Jesus, where you shall enjoy more delightful intercourse with him, than ever was, or could be, vouchsafed to his holy mother

* 2 Tim. ii. 12.

† Luke xi. 27, 28.

upon earth. O rejoice, and give thanks for the distinguished honour, to which you are called! Determine, with Saint Paul, to “know no man after the flesh,” and never more to boast of any worldly connections. Nay, if you could claim a relation to the Saviour himself, you should place no dependence upon it *, but pray, ~~that~~, being joined to him by his Spirit, you may now be conformed to his image, and finally “behold his face in righteousness.”

Amen.

* 2 Cor. v. 16.

JUDAS ISCARIOT.

CHAP. IV.

Judas, appointed an apostle—dishonest—censured Mary for waste of ointment—warned by Jesus—betrayed him for money—destroyed himself.

HAVING concluded the history of the Saviour, we may pay a more minute attention to some of his chief companions. Twelve persons were selected to be his intimate associates, and the partakers of his counsels, and were also by a peculiar designation, distinct from the choice of friendship, appointed to sustain the high and important function of Apostles. All these were upright, and eminent in holiness, excepting one: an indelible mark of infamy is left upon the name of Judas Iscariot. The eleven others had their failings, but Judas possessed nothing truly good: he was vicious throughout, unsound from first to last, a finished hypocrite, who, under the cloak of religion, concealed the basest principles. Though a follower, a preacher, and an Apostle of Christ, he felt no sincere regard for him, but sought only to make gain of godliness.

This is a tremendous subject, and ought to excite great searchings of heart. The character before us stands as an awful admonition, not to trust in any

favourable appearances or reputation for sanctity. Even in a sacred function, with admired gifts, and acknowledged usefulness, we may act as traitors to the cause of Christ, and finally perish. Sooner or later the dissembler with God will be detected, and receive his just reward. "Every plant, which our heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up*." Thus also the Saviour declares, "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity †." Let us judge ourselves; and surrender up our whole hearts to God, "without partiality and without hypocrisy." So shall we be preserved from the fatal apostasy of Judas.

Though the particulars, which are recorded of his life, are few, yet the distinguishing features of it are clearly drawn. From the beginning he seems to have been under the influence of that base principle, "the love of money." Probably, he assumed a religious profession from secular views. He might be struck with the miracles of Jesus, and led to expect considerable advantage from the service of a Master, who had all nature at his command. Or, supposing that our Lord was about to erect a temporal dominion, he might indulge the hope of obtaining a large share in its honours and emoluments. A poor and sordid motive this, for pretending a regard to the Gospel!

* Matt. xv. 13.

† vii. 22, 23.

Judas was intrusted with the ministry of the word, and appointed to be an Apostle, by Christ himself. Nay, he appears to have received as full and extensive a commission, as the other eleven, and to have been furnished with the same miraculous powers *. According to his charge, he went forth to preach the kingdom of God from town to town, and testified of that salvation, which he understood not for himself. He healed all manner of sickness, without any principle of benevolence, and even cast out devils, while he himself remained the slave of Satan.

In the designation of Judas to this sacred office, our Lord was not imposed on. He well understood what were the miscreant's motives and purposes, and foresaw the whole of his future conduct. It may, indeed, seem a wonder, that the searcher of all hearts should choose a known traitor. We confess, those are most awful dispensations, by which hypocrites and persons of base character are brought forward to minister in holy things, and possess power in the Church. Yet these cases every where occur, and the Lord does not prevent them; nay, he so orders things in his providence, that they must infallibly take place. He does not influence any man to do wickedly; but, though he continueth holy, he is pleased to allow sinners full opportunity for pursuing and accomplishing their own plans. Thus he dealt with Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and thus he deals with many, who are of the worst disposition, at this very time. He raises them to situations, in which they are capable of doing extensive

* Matt. x. 4. Mar. iii. 19. Luke vi. 16.

mischief, disgracing, opposing, or corrupting the Gospel, which they profess to patronise or preach. Yet wise ends are answered: the extreme depravity of human nature is more clearly demonstrated, the faith and patience of the faints are tried and improved, and God himself manifests both his forbearance and his justice.

Jesus and his disciples, in their various removals, had one common stock for their support. This money was committed to Judas: he carried the bag, which contained chiefly the charitable contributions of others, who ministered unto them. He was intrusted with the secular affairs of this little household, and bought their provisions. It was not much which they possessed; yet Judas took care to embezzle something for himself. Probably, he had sought and obtained the office,* with a view of practising his dishonesty.

Out of their small fund, it should seem, a part was designed for the poor. But Judas made his advantage of the kind intentions of his Master: while he was ready to second every proposal of relieving the necessitous, he contrived to appropriate the alms to his own use. Just before the last passover, when Mary, Lazarus's sister, out of the warmth of her regard, anointed the feet of her dear Lord with costly perfumes, Judas raised the objection, and complained with the greatest vehemence, "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor*?" We might have concluded, that he was a

* John xii. 1—3. xiii. 29.

man of extreme tenderness and liberality : but this was a base pretence. He felt not for the miseries of his fellow-creatures ; he wished only for the opportunity of securing to himself the three hundred pence.

Hypocrites are generally censorious, and forward to condemn the fervour of zeal as extravagance. Many, likewise, gratify their own penurious disposition, while they allege their intentions of making a reserve for charitable purposes. They would be thought compassionate and kind, and yet they chiefly consult, how they shall enrich themselves. Alas ! with a heart enslaved to covetousness, it is difficult to be strictly honest. The strongest barriers are insufficient to restrain such a temper ; and hence it is, that the most sacred trusts are frequently betrayed. Men break through every solemn obligation, in order to obtain a paltry sum : and they hoard up gold and silver, “ the rust of which shall be a witness against them, and shall eat their flesh, as it were fire *.”

Let not that, therefore, be censured as a sinful or needless expense, which is laid out in the cause of Christ, and from love to his name. We plead not for waste or profusion, but, on the contrary, inculcate frugality, with the view of promoting a more enlarged benevolence. Let not charity, however, be a mere pretence : it should appear in liberal exertions. There is a sense, in which we may say to every individual among us, You are intrusted with your Lord's money. Presume not to spend the whole upon yourselves, nor yet refuse to apply it to the proper uses.

* James v. 3.

Remember the interpretation, which the disciples put on their Master's injunction to Judas. Their mistake was an acknowledgment of his usual practice, and of the mercy, in which he delighted. They thought that he had the keeper of their treasure "give something to the poor*." Ah! in how many ways may you prove unfaithful stewards! Though you detest robbery, yet are there no just claims, which you withhold? Or do you not resemble the traitor, by acting from motives in secret, far other than those which you profess before the world?

Judas, probably, practised much caution and reserve in his behaviour, that he might conceal his real character. One sin may prevent or counteract another. A covetous man, merely through parsimony, abstains from that kind of sensuality, which is expensive; and a hypocrite, through fear of detection, studies to avoid open and gross immoralities. Such an one must throw off the mask, before he can associate with the profligate and profane. To maintain his reputation for sanctity, he will conform to many religious observances, which he dislikes, and put himself under painful restraints. In this respect Judas acted his part so well, that he escaped the suspicion of his brethren the Apostles. Alas! we apprehend, that some among ourselves may assume and retain the garb of piety, with no better dispositions. Yet we allow, that we are not warranted in drawing any unfavourable conclusions against individuals, in whom we do not perceive any glaring incon-

* John xiii, 29.

sistency of conduct. Nay, we should cherish the most charitable hopes of each other, as far and as long as we can. But though there may be much insincerity, which is not discovered among men, "all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him, with whom we have to do *."

Our Lord, being perfectly aware of the character of Judas, more than once described his case, reproved him for his base designs, and warned him of his danger. This very circumstance aggravates his guilt; as he sinned not in ignorance, but against solemn admonitions. When many disciples withdrew, and it seemed dubious whether even the Apostles would remain, Jesus exclaimed, "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" And this, the Evangelist observes, he spake of Judas Iscariot, who had then, probably, formed the scheme of betraying his Master †.

At the last supper, when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he declared in the hearing of them all, that there was one of unsound character in their company: "Ye are clean," said he, "but not all: for he knew who should betray him ‡." And again he affirmed, "I speak not of you all; I know whom I have chosen: but that the scripture may be fulfilled, He that eateth bread with me, hath lift up his heel against me." Then, with expressions of deep distress, he repeated the warning, that there was treachery among them, and that he should soon be delivered to his enemies through the base perfidy of one, who sat with him at the

* Heb. iv. 13. † John vi. 70, 71. ‡ xiii. 10, 11, 18.

table *. His information became still more particular, and his reference to Judas too clear to be doubted. At the same time, he added a tremendous denunciation of divine vengeance against the wretch, who should dare to perpetrate so horrible a crime.

Judas was not ignorant from the first, that he was the person meant; for the 'diabolical plan had been previously laid, and he waited only for an opportunity to carry it into effect. But did not his Lord's admonitions terrify and confound him? Did they not, at least, divert him from his purpose? Could he be so obdurate, as to persist in his resolution, and, with his eyes open, rush on to everlasting destruction? Ah! what desperate hardness of heart; what extreme madness was here! The traitor, as if he were unmoved, and unconscious of those designs which were imputed to him, dared to ask, "Master, is it I?" and though Jesus immediately replied, that he was the man, yet even this, it should seem, produced no alteration.

His impious effrontery will appear the more astonishing, if we allow, what is highly probable, that Judas, as well as the rest, partook of the Eucharist, or the solemn ordinance of the Lord's supper †. Being aware, however, of the extent of human depravity, we cease to wonder at human guilt, but not at the forbearance of our God, who could suffer one of so abandoned a disposition to trifle with and profane his most sacred institutions. Similar cases, indeed, occur among

* Matt. xxvi. 20—29. Mar. xiv. 17—25. Luke xxii. 14—23. John xiii. 21—26.

† See Luke xxii, 20, 21.

ourselves: nor can they be entirely prevented by any exertions of ecclesiastical discipline. The Lord, probably, permits hypocrites to proceed to such lengths, for the display of his own justice in the final issue. With hearts full of all unrighteousness, they may frequent his house and table: but at last they will have to render an awful account of these their religious performances, and “receive the greater damnation*.”

If they be plainly warned by their friends or ministers, this, also, will aggravate their guilt, and constitute a heavy charge against them at the day of judgment. O that they would listen to the representations and entreaties of their faithful monitors; that they would pause, and consider the event, and not persevere in defiance of everlasting perdition! It is a favourable sign, when men examine themselves, and pray earnestly to be delivered from all duplicity of mind and perfidious conduct. Then are they least likely to sin or to perish as the traitor did.

Our Lord having frequently declared the approach of his own death, Judas probably began to fear, that all his schemes and expectations of worldly advancement would be defeated, and wished to obtain the best compensation possible for his disappointment. The infamous wretch, therefore, entered into a contract with the Jewish rulers, to betray his Master into their hands for a trifling sum; and from that time he sought an opportunity of doing it in a private manner †. It is said, that he was instigated by

* Matt. xxiii. 14. † Matt. xxvi. 14—16. Mar. xiv. 10, 11. Luke xxii. 3—6.

the Devil; but this is not to be considered as any excuse. Satan, doubtless, takes advantage of our evil inclinations; and he may be permitted to assist us in contriving and executing our projects: yet the guilt is entirely our own. As it was Judas's plan and desire to procure money, Satan suggested this method of gratifying his wishes, and continued to urge him to it, till the iniquitous purpose was accomplished.

After the solemn admonitions of Christ, Judas, instead of relenting, gave himself up, without reserve, to the influence of the accursed fiend; and, perhaps indignant on being suspected and discovered, he proceeded immediately to perpetrate his base design*. According to the plot, which had been laid, he consented to conduct an armed band of ruffians, in order to apprehend his Master†. He knew the garden, where Jesus had been accustomed to retire for devotion, and where he himself, probably, had frequently joined with him in prayer. O how different the end, for which he now repaired to Gethsemane! He undertook to be a guide and assistant to those, who were filled with murderous rage against his Lord. With this intent he went up to Jesus, and, pretending reverence and love, saluted him. The kiss was the appointed signal for seizing his person: and thus, by the aid of a perfidious Apostle, the Saviour was betrayed into the hands of wicked men to be crucified and slain.

* John xiii. 27—30. † Matt. xxvi. 47—50. Mar. xiv. 43—46. Luke xxii. 47—54. John xviii. 2—12.

We view the transaction with amazement and horror. The sin of the traitor is marked with peculiar aggravations. We are ready to ask, Is this the treatment, which the benevolent and holy Jesus deserved? Or shall we wonder at the opposition of the ignorant and openly profane, when one of his most intimate associates rises up against him? Do not the former professions of Judas, and the sacred function he sustained, render his conduct the more detestable? Can we conceive a more consummate hypocrite, or a baser act of treachery? How pungent the reproof, addressed to him, "Betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?" Convinced as thou art of his high character, how canst thou favour the designs of his enemies? Or why dost thou assume the mask of friendship, in order to practise thy villany? What is the advantage proposed? Is Jesus to be bartered away for thirty pieces of silver, the price of a common slave? And is eternal life to be given up for so mean a consideration?

There are many ways, in which we ourselves may act the same diabolical part. While we pretend a high regard for Christ, we may expose his cause to contempt, imbolden blasphemers to vent their impiety, and even teach them to do it with success. But has he merited such a return for all his kindness? Or, shall we so insult him, as to cry, "Hail, Master," at the very time when we entertain the basest intentions against him? What have we found in his decided adversaries, which should induce us to espouse and promote their interests? Are these the men,
with

with whom we would associate, and whose hands we would strengthen? Can we, then, prove, that our former professed principles are false, or that Jesus will not make good his engagements? Or what emolument do we expect from the opposite party? Alas! it is not possible, that they should offer any equivalent, any proper compensation for the immense loss, we shall incur by our perfidy.

Judas, perhaps, considered not what would follow. He might imagine, that his Master would escape out of the hands of his enemies, as he had done before. But be that as it may, when he saw him condemned, and about to be nailed to the cross, his conscience was alarmed, and he felt inexpressible horror for the atrocious deed which he had committed*. Ah! what would he then have given, to have revoked his bargain? What comfort did he receive from the thirty pieces of silver, the wages of his unrighteousness? He could not bear to retain the money in his possession, but immediately restored it to the Jewish rulers, declaring his heinous guilt, and the anguish of his soul, for delivering up an innocent person to fall by their violence.

And did not those furious persecutors relent, when they heard so striking a confession? Did they not tremble for themselves, and endeavour to rescue the holy sufferer? No: they remained obdurate. But the traitor, unable to support himself under the convictions and terrors of his mind, cast down before them the bribe which he had accepted, and instantly

* Matt. xxvii. 3—10.

fled away, that he might put an end to his wretched life. "He went and hanged himself." Probably, the place, which he chose for his own execution, was on a precipice, and the rope, by which he was suspended, failed: for "falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out*." In this plight he lay a miserable spectacle to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and, as the fact excited general notice, a public monument of God's vengeance.

What an ignominious and lamentable death for a follower and an Apostle of Christ! How foolish, as well as wicked, the expedient, by which he attempted to release himself from the anguish of his mind! He went "to his own place †," the place, for which alone he was fitted by his disposition and conduct, where his accusing conscience will continue to torment him with inconceivably great and uninterrupted horrors, and where he will be exhibited as an example of divine justice for ever. "It had been good for that man, if he had not been born."

But is it not said, that he repented? Yes; on some accounts he was sorry for what he had done. Shocked with the dread of consequences, he made confession of his guilt, and restored his impious gain. But he possessed not that "godly sorrow," which "worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of ‡." He discovered no proper humiliation; he offered up no petition for mercy. Under extreme misery, his heart remained full of vile affections and rebellion against God: and this will be the case of every one, who

* Acts i. 18, 19. † i. 25. ‡ 2 Cor. vii. 10.

“suffers the vengeance of eternal fire.” The manner of his death proved, that he was not a penitent: he died in the actual commission of sin, and of that sin, which, from its nature, excludes repentance. He died as a murderer; “and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him *.”

From such a precedent, will any undertake to plead for suicide? We observe, that Satan generally tempts men, who are a burden and terror to themselves, to seek relief by this expedient. We therefore warn them to consider, whither it will lead. You wish to fly from present pain; but you are rushing into that, which is infinitely more intolerable and eternal. This the Devil tries to conceal, or persuades you to disbelieve, till your ruin be unavoidable and remediless. O listen not to his suggestions; for “he is a liar!” O lift not up against yourselves the hand of violence, which would render your salvation impossible! Cry to God with incessant importunity, that he would extend his mercy, and communicate peace to your souls. Though you fear it is too late, we would encourage your application: many, whose cases seemed as desperate as your’s, have obtained forgiveness and comfort. Only consent to make the trial, and wait upon the Lord. At any rate, dare not to meditate your own destruction: surely it will be soon enough to enter upon a state of never-ending torment, when God himself shall give you the summons.

That we may be impressed with an abhorrence of departing from the faith, let us contemplate, more

* 1 John iii. 15.

minutely, the tremendous consequences of the apostasy of Judas.

1. He involved the faithful disciples of Jesus in deep distress. Those, who had been attached to the Gospel, would be ready to suspect the truth of their own principles, when they observed a zealous preacher totally renounce them, and even sell his master to his enemies, "for filthy lucre's sake." This circumstance, probably, staggered the Apostles themselves, and increased their confusion, when they all forsook their Lord. You, who love the Saviour, cannot but grieve for such instances as this, more than for any temporal calamities. You lament, that the Saviour is "wounded in the house of his friends." You bewail the persons, who thus "draw back unto perdition," and in whom all your fond hopes are disappointed. You are ready to fear, that the work of God will come to nought, and "the armies of the aliens" prevail. Perhaps, you tremble under an apprehension, that you yourselves, also, in some evil hour of temptation, shall "fall after the same example of unbelief." But we entreat you to compose your minds. God will plead his own cause, and vindicate his honour. He is faithful, and therefore you are secure in his Covenant. He will not suffer any real believer to depart and perish, as Judas did. These cases, we allow, are painful, but they ought not to shake your firmness or your hopes. We are forewarned of them in the scriptures: even the treachery of Judas was no other than a completion of several express predictions. "It must needs be, that

offences come; but wo to that man, by whom the offence cometh *."

2. He afforded the enemies of Jesus cause of triumph. Long had they represented the Saviour as a deceiver; and, probably, they were confirmed in that opinion by the conduct of Judas. It might then be asserted, with some plausibility, that the cheat was discovered, since one of the preachers of this new religion had forsaken it, and come over to their interest. Thus it is now. Apostates bring the Gospel into contempt, and increase the prejudice and obduracy of infidels. The Lord, in righteous judgment, permits such occurrences, as furnish men with a pretext for opposing that truth, which they hate. They exclaim, therefore, "The whole system is a delusion: there can be no real value, at least, in those principles, which so many, after long trial, have renounced. It should seem, that the most zealous advocates for the faith are all actuated by sinister motives, since some of their company have betrayed their unsoundness: we may judge of the rest from these specimens."

Will you hear, what may be said in reply? Ask those very persons, who have deserted Christianity, ask them seriously, Who are in the right? In general, they are constrained to bear a decisive testimony in favour of that religion, which they have relinquished, and to condemn themselves. This Judas did. Many, also, like him, have shewn the greatest horrors for their sin, and perished miserably. Their case,

* Matt. xviii. 7.

therefore,

therefore, loudly proclaims the folly and madness of forsaking the ways of God. That some, that numbers of those, who profess the faith, have never felt its influence, we confess and lament. But still "the foundation of God standeth sure." If, indeed, it be fair to judge of a whole society from certain individuals, there is no such thing as sincerity in the world. Then all the Apostles were vile impostors; and Judas acted the most honest part, when he threw off the mask. But this, we suppose, no one will venture to assert. Such a declaration would be an insult to the common sense of mankind.

Let us view the apostate once more, and observe

3. He brought upon himself aggravated misery and ruin. We have seen, that he received no comfort from the money, which he so eagerly desired, "Riches profit not in the day of wrath*:" when procured by unrighteousness, they frequently fill the minds of their possessors, even in this life, with anguish and dismay. Thus, also, St. Paul testified, "The love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows†." In various ways God can afflict and punish sinners, while he suffers them to accomplish their wishes. He can render them so much a terror to themselves, that they shall "choose strangling, and death rather than life‡." But the most tremendous display of his justice, in the perdition of ungodly men, is reserved for another world, where they shall

* Prov. xi. 4. † 1 Tim. vi. 10. ‡ Job vii. 15.

receive, in exact proportion, "according to their works." There shall every vile apostate, as well as the traitor Judas, be distinguished by peculiar marks of indignation; for no guilt can be so heinous as their's.

Do not these considerations alarm our fears? Then let us watch and pray: and especially let us beware of those snares, by which others have fallen. Let us be serious and upright, renouncing every carnal motive in our transactions with God. "A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways *." But, taking hold of the Covenant in Jesus Christ, and aiming at the divine glory with singleness of eye, we shall persevere in righteousness, and be "kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation †." Amen. *

* James i. 8.

† 1 Pet. i. 5.

SAINT PETER.

CH'AP. V.

SECT. I.

Peter, a fisherman, brought to Jesus by his brother Andrew—took a miraculous draught of fishes—was appointed an Apostle—walked on the sea—confessed Christ—one of his most favourite and zealous attendants—was warned at the last supper—slept in Gethsemane—defended his Master—forsook and denied him—repented—had an interview with Jesus, after the resurrection.

A GREAT variety of natural dispositions appears even among those, who possess the grace of God.* Each man's peculiar temper gives a cast to his religious conduct, and, while it distinguishes him from others, exposes him to peculiar snares and temptations. Those of lively affections are apt to be unguarded and precipitate, and frequently offend through indiscreet and unseasonable exertions of zeal. But the calm and sedate, however they may deliberate and judge wisely, often want the fervour, courage, and activity, which are necessary for difficult undertakings and extensive usefulness.

The history, now proposed to our consideration, will evince the propriety of these remarks. Of all

the persons, who accompanied our Lord, none appears more conspicuous than Saint Peter. He has been styled the prince of the Apostles, and not improperly, for he generally stood forth as their leader in every transaction. The excellence of his character, to which Jesus himself gave the strongest attestations, demands our esteem. We must admire his warm attachment to his Master, his fidelity, fortitude, and vigour. Yet we allow that he had failings, and on one melancholy occasion was betrayed into very dishonourable conduct. He was naturally sanguine, bold, and confident; and, through the influence of this his prevailing temper, he sometimes appeared forward, rash, and presumptuous. We do not attempt to justify or palliate the faults of pious persons; but we ought not to be vehement in our censures. Let not the careless and the indolent, who loudly condemn the imprudence of some lively Christians, flatter themselves that their caution and inactivity are more pleasing to God, than the honest warmth of those, who, like Peter, may occasionally over-act their part. The latter may be often wrong, but the former, being destitute of love and zeal, are never right. It is incumbent upon us to regard the Saviour, not with indifference, but with fervency of affection, and on every suitable opportunity to exert all our abilities for promoting his glory.

Peter was an inhabitant of Bethsaida in Galilee, where, though Jesus preached often and performed many miracles, the Gospel was generally rejected. Here he carried on the mean and laborious occupation

tion of a fisherman, for which the place was conveniently situated. His low rank and education, perhaps, rendered him insignificant, if not contemptible, in the eyes of the world, but he obtained favour with God, and an honourable distinction in the Church. The Lord seeth not as man seeth: He often passeth by the great, the noble, and the learned, and, to accomplish his purposes, selects such instruments, as are thought weak and unfit for the work. He chooses an Apostle for the publication of his rich mercy, not from the courtiers of the Roman Emperor, or the philosophers of Athens, but from the poor fishermen of Bethsaida. By such a dispensation He exhibits both his power and his grace, and gives a public declaration, "that no flesh should glory in his presence."

Peter was the brother of Andrew, and probably, like him, had been a disciple of John the Baptist, before his acquaintance with Jesus *. Andrew no sooner obtained the knowledge of the Saviour, than he conducted Peter to him. How many have reason to thank God for their pious friends, whose conversation, instructions, and exhortations have brought them into the way of peace and righteousness! Let us look with compassion on the souls of our associates and relatives, recommend the Gospel of Christ to their acceptance, and labour assiduously for their spiritual welfare. Jesus received the new convert with kindness, and shewed by his address that he was not ignorant of him though a stranger. He also intimated a design of taking him into his service, by giving him a new name, expres-

* John i. 40—42.

five of peculiar firmness and steadfastness. He said, "Thou art Simon," (such being his former appellation) "the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, a stone," or "a rock." We, with the ancient church, have adopted the name of PETER, whose signification is the same with that of Cephas, and which was the term used to explain it.

It is probable, that St. Peter continued with our Lord for some time, and then, returning for a season to his old employment, dwelt at Capernaum. There we find that Jesus went into his house, and miraculously healed his wife's mother of a fever*. There, also, Jesus met with him following his occupation, entered into his ship, and directed him to cast his net into the sea†. He had laboured all the night without success; but now, at one draught, he took an immense quantity of fishes. This was evidently designed as an omen for good, and an encouragement to venture upon his Master's service with the greater confidence. The fact so plainly ascertained the dignity of the Saviour, that Peter was overwhelmed with reverential awe, knowing himself unworthy to stand before this holy and exalted Personage. With the deepest self-abasement, occasioned by an impressive conviction of guilt, he cried out, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." If we have formed proper conceptions of the divine purity, we shall not wonder at the fear and confusion here expressed. The most excellent men have, in like manner, confessed themselves unfit to appear in the pre-

* Luke iv. 31, 38. 39.

† v. 1—11.

ience of God, and, when favoured with his nearest approaches and clearest revelations, have declared the strongest abhorrence of themselves.

But Jesus immediately replied with words of comfort to his trembling servant, and reminded him, that he must prepare for nobler employment, and from that time be occupied with remarkable success in catching men. The call went to his heart with irresistible energy: he did not then want any further inducement to become a stated follower of his Lord. Every worldly consideration gave way to higher motives: "he forsook all," his fishes, nets, vessels, friends, and relations, that he might devote himself to the work of the ministry.

Soon afterwards he was appointed to the Apostolic office, and sent out, with eleven others, to preach the Gospel, and confirm its doctrines by miraculous operations *. Whenever the twelve are enumerated in the New Testament, Peter's name stands in the front. He was among the first, who were taken into Christ's service, and always distinguished himself by his zeal and activity. But, though we allow a peculiar excellency in his character, we cannot favour the conclusion, that he possessed authority over the rest. There is no appearance in the sacred history of any such supremacy or infallibility, as the Church of Rome ascribes to him. No superiority of this kind was ever granted by the Saviour, demanded by Peter, or acknowledged by his brethren †. The arrogant

* Matt. x. 2. Luke vi. 13, 14.

† Matt. xxiii. 8—12.

Acts xv. 13, &c. 2 Cor. xii. 11. Gal. ii. 11.

claims, therefore, of those who call themselves his successors, the Bishops of Rome, are absurd and impious. They have no foundation in the scriptures, and produce very mischievous effects. But, waving the consideration of those errors, we should pray that all the preachers of the Gospel may obtain a measure of the same grace, and manifest the same holy principles, by which St. Peter was influenced. So shall no respect to their interest, reputation, or connections in life prevent them from promoting, to the uttermost, the cause of Christ and the enlargement of his kingdom.

We observe Peter's constant attachment to his Master, and readiness to profess that regard. On one occasion, when he saw Jesus walking upon the tempestuous sea in the night, at first he was intimidated, as well as his companions; but afterward, hearing the gracious voice of his Lord, he cried out, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water *." This address, evidently, proceeded from faith and love, and yet betrayed much forwardness and self-confidence. To check these wrong principles, by giving him a painful proof of his weakness, which he was little aware of, Jesus permitted him to venture upon the deep.

We behold Peter, then, upheld by a divine power, treading on the boisterous waves, as on dry ground. But at length, when he attended to the violence of the wind, not retaining, as he should have done, his dependence on the Lord, his courage drooped, and his body began to sink. He expected nothing but imme-

* Matt. xiv. 22—33.

diate destruction, and exclaimed in great anguish, "Lord, save me." This occurrence, which was an awful preface of what he afterwards experienced, should have taught him more diffidence and meekness of spirit. Jesus immediately afforded him the necessary assistance, caught him as he was on the point of being overwhelmed, and conducted him safely to the ship. At the same time he sharply reproved him for his unbelief, through which his attempt had failed: "O! thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" Alas! how often have we been frustrated in our good designs, on the very same account! For a season, perhaps, we seemed as if we could trust the Lord; but, when we took off our eye from him, and thought of our dangerous situation, our fears prevailed, and, if Jesus had not rescued us, we must have utterly perished.

On another occasion, when many disciples forsook the Saviour, and the Apostles themselves appeared ready to depart, Peter, with his usual fervour, professed his firm regard and unshaken resolution not to desert his Master*. "Lord," said he, "to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life; and we believe, and are sure, that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God." This was indeed an evidence of the sincerity of his faith, and the warmth of his affection. With such views of the Saviour, we also shall adhere to him, and abhor the proposal of seeking any other refuge. If our souls are established in a full persuasion, that he alone can give us peace and everlasting

* John vi. 66—69.

happiness, then we shall be willing to persevere through every difficulty and danger in his service.

Jesus enquiring of his disciples, what opinions were formed concerning him, St. Peter stood forth, and made that noble confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God *." His Master, in reply, pronounced him truly blessed, as having obtained this clear knowledge and strong confidence, not by any peculiar discernment of his own, or information from others, not by any human abilities or assistance, but by the distinguishing grace of God and illumination of his Spirit. Jesus added, in very remarkable terms, that Peter, as his significant name implied, should be used as a "Rock," that on him, as one of its main supports, should be built the glorious edifice of the Church, and that, however opposed by Satan and his agents; it should continue to rise, and stand firm and impregnable against the most violent assaults †. He declared further, that he should

* Matt. xvi. 13—19.

† Some suppose, that Jesus intended to point out himself as the Rock; and it is allowed, that He is the only sure foundation, on which his Church can rest, 1 Cor. iii. 11. Others understand, that the confession of faith, which St. Peter here made, is the Rock referred to, since the prosperity and even the existence of the Church depend on the doctrines, included in that confession. But the connection of the passage does not seem to be well preserved by either of those senses; and the Author conceives, that there is no more impropriety in considering Peter as a support of the Church, than in representing the Apostles and Prophets as the foundation, on which it is built, Eph. ii. 20. Rev. xxi. 14. Such an interpretation derogates not from the honour of Christ; nor can it favour the popish notion of Peter's supremacy.

appoint

appoint this favoured Apostle to be a principal officer in the kingdom of grace, and deliver its keys into his hands, as an emblem of authority committed to him for the administration of its affairs. But, with whatever powers Peter was invested, he possessed them only in common with his brethren, as they also afterwards received a commission of the same extent †. On no ground can the tyrannical usurpations of the Popes of Rome be justified, from the grant here given to Peter. It is impossible for them to shew, that it contains, or that they derive from it, a right to absolve and to condemn, as they presume to do.

But, waving that unprofitable controversy, let us rejoice in the security of the Church under the care of Jesus. It will be opposed by strong and malicious adversaries: but He has engaged for its protection and continuance. Do we, as living stones, constitute a part of this spiritual building? Then we shall firmly resist every attack. Can we adopt Peter's confession, with a full conviction of its truth? And is that conviction produced, in consequence of divine light communicated to the mind? O how great the privilege and blessedness, thus to be acquainted with the character and salvation of Jesus!

Soon afterwards the Apostle received a sharp reprehension. Perhaps, elated by these singular declarations in his favour, and still entertaining ideas of a temporal kingdom, he could not bear to hear his Master foretel the passion then approaching, and even dared to censure him on that account: he said, "Be

* John xx. 23.

it far from thee, Lord; this shall not be unto thee *." The address was in every respect unsuitable: it expressed great ignorance and presumption; and therefore he was rebuked for it with an unusual severity. Jesus perceived by what wrong affections his servant was actuated, and, it should seem, he felt the suggestion as a temptation to himself: he replied, "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." Alas! how easily may such, as are most exalted in grace, be turned aside by a depraved nature, and both speak and act under the influence of carnal principles, by which, in effect, they promote the purposes of Satan! Let us enquire, Do not we, like Peter, object to the cross, and, as if we had lost our spiritual taste, lay our plans for worldly advancement, through covetousness or ambition? Do we not shew, on some occasions at least, that we do not perfectly understand or comply with the humbling and self-denying scheme of the Gospel? What are we then doing, but taking part with the Devil, and opposing the designs of Jesus?

St. Peter was not only a companion of Christ, together with the other Apostles, but numbered among his most intimate friends, and intrusted with the most unreserved communications of his mind and counsel. He was one of the favoured three, who saw the Saviour transfigured on the mount: and he, in particular, expressed a rapturous delight in the vision and the society there assembled. He cried out in his ec-

* Matt. xvi. 21 - 23.

stasy, "Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles, one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias *." This honour he never forgot: many years afterward, and not long before his death, he attested the fact, and insisted on it as a convincing proof, that he had "not followed cunningly devised fables †." We do not look for such revelations of Christ: but his people still enjoy his spiritual presence, and by faith behold his glory. At those distinguished seasons, when taken up with him to the mount, they feel a pleasure, which is unutterable, and wish to have no more to do with terrestrial concerns. Their language then is, "Lord, it is good for us to be here!"

When certain collectors applied for the accustomed tribute, Peter readily agreed to pay their demand, and, by his Lord's directions, caught the fish, which furnished the money for that purpose ‡. In one place, he proposed the question, how often he should forgive an offending brother §. In another, after receiving a solemn admonition concerning the danger of riches, he declared, that he had forsaken all from an attachment to his Master, and expressed a hope of obtaining a recompense ||. His professions of regard were sincere, yet we discover in them some degree of self-confidence and carnal expectations.

We omit various circumstances of a less interesting nature, in which his name is introduced; observing only, that, throughout the whole history, he stands

* Matt. xvii. 1—8. † 2 Pet. i. 16—18. ‡ Matt. xvii. 24—27. § Matt. xviii. 21. || xix. 27.

distinguished by the ardour of his affection for Jesus, and by the overflowings of his zeal upon all occasions. He was faithful, bold, and vigorous in the work assigned him, ever watching the motions, and springing forward, before all the rest, to execute the will of his Lord. O that both ministers and private Christians possessed a larger measure of his fervour and diligence! Alas! we lose many opportunities of usefulness, through the coldness of our hearts in spiritual things, and dishonour our principles by the defect of our services.

We now advance to a part of the sacred narration, which may justly excite much fear and distress. A mournful spectacle is exhibited in the fall of this eminent Apostle. We presume not to allege any excuses for his conduct, which was sinful in the extreme, and marked by peculiar aggravations. May we be properly affected by the view, and learn to distrust ourselves! How preposterous it is, for creatures so depraved and helpless to be lifted up with vain confidence! Who shall be able to stand, if God withdraw his support?

When our Lord celebrated his last passover, he instructed his disciples, in the most gracious manner, by the significant action of washing their feet *. St. Peter, surprised at his condescension, objected to his performing this menial office. He said, and, it should seem, with real humility, "Thou shalt never wash my feet." But Jesus taught him, that he stood in need of a spiritual purgation, to which he should be willing

* John xiii. 1—9.

to submit. Immediately the Apostle acquiesced, when assured that he could have no part in the Saviour, unless washed by him. Let us learn to cry out for ourselves, under a sense of our defilement, "Lord, cleanse my polluted soul, and in every respect make me holy and acceptable to thyself!" Or, in Peter's words, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head."

Peter requested his Lord to explain the hints which he had given about his departure, and was then informed, that he himself must follow him, not indeed at that time, but after some years service in the Church*. He considered the reply as containing an intimation of unwillingness in him to suffer with Jesus; and, feeling his heart warm with love, he boasted that he could instantly and cheerfully meet death in his Master's defence. The declaration accorded with his real sentiments, but favoured too much of presumption, and proved that he was not properly sensible of his own weakness and danger. To check this vain boasting, and put him upon watchfulness and prayer, Jesus represented, in a most affecting manner, that Satan his subtle adversary was about to assault both him and his companions with peculiar vehemence; that he in particular, after suffering a severe loss in the conflict, would be preserved from a total defeat, and recovered for the confirmation of his brethren, in consequence of the Saviour's intercession for him†.

Such information, and from such a person, we

* John xiii. 36—38.

† Luke xxii. 31—34.

should suppose, was enough to strike a damp upon the Apostle's spirit. But he was yet too confident of his own strength to listen to the warning, and therefore he repeated the declaration, that neither bonds nor death should separate him from his Lord. Jesus then added a more express and tremendous admonition, solemnly affirming, that before the morning watch, in the course of that very night, Peter would thrice disavow all acquaintance with him. And did not this caution produce the proper effect? No: he went out with his Master to Gethsemane, but not with sufficient humility, vigilance, or prayer. Upon the road, he was again reminded of his approaching fall; but, still thinking himself incapable of such baseness and treachery, he again maintained with renewed asseverations, and in the most peremptory manner, that he would stand by his Lord in all extremities, and that, however the rest might act, he would choose death rather than deny him *. This was honest language; but it clearly betrayed that "haughty spirit," which "goeth before a fall †." It always bodes ill, when men suspect others rather than themselves, and boast of their firmness, instead of calling upon God for strength and protection. O how needful is that petition, "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe ‡!"

When they came to the garden of Gethsemane, St. Peter, with the two other favoured disciples James and John, was admitted to behold the Saviour in his deepest distress §. There he received a solemn charge

* Matt. xxvi. 31—35. † Prov. xvi. 18. ‡ Psal. cxix. 117.

§ Matt. xxvi. 36—46. Mar. xiv. 32—42. Luke xxii. 40—46.

to watch with his Lord, and pray against temptation. But, even on that occasion, he discovered a very sinful remissness. He neglected the directions given him, and, instead of being employed in holy exercises, fell asleep. His companions did the same; but a sharp reproof was addressed to him in particular, as he had been more confident than the others, "Simon, sleepest Thou? couldst not thou watch one hour?" The injunction was renewed; yet again and again he sunk into the same excessive stupor. A poor preparation for a season of severe trial!

A scene of much terror, and that foreboded a tremendous conflict, awaited the disciples and their Master. Jesus was apprehended by a band of armed men; yet we observe that St. Peter, on that event, still maintained an unshaken constancy and courage*. Remembering his vow, he drew his sword for the rescue of him he loved, and wounded a servant, who was, probably, one of the most forward among the impious crew. Thus, as he had determined, he hazarded his life rather than he would forsake Christ: and, considering this forcible resistance, it is surprising that both he and his companions were not instantly cut to pieces. Rash and impetuous in his zeal, he forgot his own and their danger; and still more unmindful of the power he had witnessed, and the strain of doctrine he had heard, he foolishly thought to protect, where protection could not be wanted, and scrupled not to use improper means. Jesus, therefore, reprov'd him, and reminded him, that, if any defence had been necessary,

* Matt. xxvi 47—54. John xviii. 1—11.

he could have procured thousands of Angels for that purpose. Christians, whose natural disposition is sanguine, are in great danger of adopting violent measures, even for the truth's sake. But the cause of God is not promoted by such expedients. "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal*."

Peter beheld his Master taken, bound, and led away as a prisoner; and, perceiving him quietly submit to this treatment, he, together with the other disciples, forsook him and fled †. His boasted courage failed; and, probably, he began to tremble for his own safety. This was a sad change indeed. Yet he seemed to be soon recovered: recovered, alas! to fall the more scandalously. Not long after, he followed Jesus, "afar off," evidently under an impression of fear. He wished to be upon the watch, that he might observe how the whole transaction terminated. He obtained admission into the place of trial, and, to avoid suspicion, mingled with the crowd. He sat down among the idle and profane servants: what poor society was this for an Apostle of Christ! There the temptation commenced; yet it was such, as appeared in itself trifling: at least, he had withstood many, which we might have thought greater. But Satan was

* 2 Cor. x. 4.

† Matt. xxvi. 56, 58, 69—75. Mar. xiv. 66—72. Luke xxii. 54—62. John xviii. 15—27. St. Peter's fall is related by all the Evangelists; but none have described it in a more heinous light than St. Mark: and if, as is generally supposed, that Gospel was reviewed by Peter himself, and written even under his direction, this circumstance may be considered as an evidence of his integrity and sincere contrition.

then

then permitted to have a strong ascendancy over his mind, and to render him, contrary to his natural temper, a most abject coward.

A certain female attendant in the high priest's palace charged him with being a disciple of Jesus. He was instantly confounded, and expressly declared that he did not so much as know him. Perhaps shocked at his own words, he went out, and heard the cock crow. Did not that sound bring to his recollection the caution, which he had received? Possibly, this might be the case; yet immediately after that warning, being interrogated by different persons, he fell again; confirming his former denial of his Master with stronger asseverations, and even with an oath. An hour afterwards, the accusation was renewed by fresh witnesses; and the third time this eminent, distinguished, and zealous Apostle disavowed all connection and acquaintance with Jesus. This he did in language, which might be calculated to clear him from the imputation, but which we should have supposed could never come out of such a mouth: "he began to curse and to swear."

We stand amazed, while we view the atrocious sin, with all its aggravations. If we have been preserved from so shameful a declension, O what thanks and praises are due to Him, who hath kept our souls! But this history will teach us not to presume on our imagined steadfastness. We are still liable to be tempted and overcome. Nay, there is no wickedness so heinous, which we may not be induced to perpetrate. Our danger is the greater, as we are con-

stantly watched by a subtle and malicious adversary, who “desires to have us, that he may sift us as wheat.” O let us be the more vigilant, and prepared to resist his attacks! There were some preceding steps, which led to Peter’s calamitous miscarriage. He depended upon his own strength, neglected to pray, and mixed with bad company. Let this be regarded and improved as a solemn caution to ourselves. Let us beware of those omissions and failures, which are thought trifling: they may lead to the most fatal events.

Such cases are most lamentable; and yet the Lord God sees fit to permit them, and even renders them subservient to his own gracious purposes. His offending people are more deeply abased, while their painful experience testifies their total depravity and entire helplessness: they learn to walk more circumspectly, perceive more of the excellency and value of redemption, and become more cordially attached to the Saviour. There are persons, indeed, upon whom these instances have a bad effect: but they must answer for their own perverse abuses. If they are encouraged to sin, here is nothing which can justify their conduct. They prove their own desperate wickedness, while they plead the examples of others; so that their very excuses will be turned against themselves.

The fall of Peter was scandalous, but not of long continuance. The same night, and almost the same hour, he was restored and brought back to God as a weeping penitent. Immediately after his last profane

fane declaration, the cock crew the second time; and, it should seem, that sound, which so exactly fulfilled the previous admonition given him, deeply affected his heart. But, more especially, he was awakened by the eye of his injured master, who had been within the hearing of some of his impious speeches. "The Lord turned, and looked upon Peter; and Peter remembered his word." That look pierced his very soul: and yet, we apprehend, it was a look, not of indignation, which would have driven him to despair, but of the most compassionate regard: it upbraided him for his treachery, but encouraged his hope of forgiveness. Then he beheld the heinousness of his transgression; and, under the strong influence of shame, confusion, and pungent sorrow, he sought where he might hide his head, and vent the distresses of his mind. "He went out and wept bitterly." Where, then, is the promised sweetness of sin? Rather, what complicated miseries does it produce! How deep the wound, which it leaves upon the conscience! Many, alas! are almost overwhelmed with anguish, on account of their backslidings, and cry out day and night, with a painful remembrance of what they have lost, "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation*." Yet let them not say, "There is no hope;" since we here refer them to one, who was recovered from his fall, pardoned, and again established with equal, if not with greater, strength.

We read no more of this Apostle, till the morning of the resurrection. The interval must have been

* Psal. li. 12.

to him a season of extreme affliction, spent in prayers and tears. But, upon the first tidings that the Lord was risen, Peter, who was in John's company, ran with eager haste to see the sepulchre *. A celestial messenger, proclaiming the joyful event to certain pious women, directed them to inform the disciples of their Master's design to meet them, and made mention of Peter's name in particular. This was calculated to comfort him, as it conveyed an intimation, that he was not abandoned or forgotten †. Soon afterwards, on the same day, Jesus shewed himself alive to him, before the rest of the Apostles had obtained that sight: and there was not one, who stood so much in need of support and consolation ‡.

The Saviour, also, after his resurrection, favoured him with peculiar notice, in a very remarkable interview at the sea of Tiberias §. He appeared to Peter and certain other disciples, who were fishing, and by his miraculous influence filled their net with large fishes. Peter, discovering his dear Lord upon the shore, instantly cast himself out of the ship, that he might swim to him, and testify the strength of his attachment. They dined together, and then a most affecting discourse ensued.

The former professions of the Apostle might seem to be rendered dubious, if not entirely falsified, by his late misconduct. Probably with a reference to this circumstance, Jesus now enquired, whether his love was indeed greater than that of others, as he

* John xx. 1—10. † Mar. xvi. 7. ‡ Luke xxiv. 34.
 † Cor. xv. 5. § John xxi. 1, &c.

had

had once boasted. The interrogation conveyed a tender reproof, to which Peter replied only by appealing to Jesus, as acquainted with the state of his heart, for the sincerity of his regard.* He was then commanded to give evidence of it, by attending to his pastoral office, and feeding the meanest and weakest of the flock. This contained, in effect, a renewal of his Apostolic commission, and therefore a full testimony of forgiveness. Thrice was the question proposed, and thrice did he call upon the Saviour, to whom his inmost soul was open, for the attestation of his integrity. But, having become more diffident of himself, he presumed not to intimate, that he felt a stronger affection than the rest. As the charge, also, was thrice repeated, there could not remain a doubt, that he was reinstated in his place. Jesus predicted, that in his old age he should suffer a violent death, and glorify God in the pains of crucifixion, and concluded his prophecy with an injunction to follow the steps of his Master. Peter wished to be informed, what would become of John, but received for answer, that, leaving the concerns of others, he must attend to his own, and labour to imitate the example set before him.

Here we pause, and stand in admiration of that grace, which can pardon, restore, and save, even the most heinous backsliders. "Return unto the Lord your God," you, who "have fallen by your iniquity." He himself declares, "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely*." O confess

* Hos. xiv. 1, 4.

your baseness, and weep with genuine contrition for your aggravated offence! But consider also, if you have obtained mercy, and God be pleased to employ you again in his service, what grateful acknowledgments of his love, what vigorous exertions to promote his cause, are due from you more than from others? You cannot expiate your guilt, or repair the mischief you have done: but desire, at least, to prove your recovery, exhort your brethren to maintain their steadfastness, and labour to bring again those, who, like yourselves, have been driven away. Let your great Exemplar be ever before your eyes. Follow him more closely and constantly than before; follow him, even unto death, and you shall finally reign with him in glory. Amen.

SAINT PETER.

SECT. 2.

Peter proposed the election of a new Apostle—preached on the day of Pentecost—healed a lame man, and addressed the people—imprisoned—pleaded before the Sanhedrim—detected Ananias—was again imprisoned, brought before the Sanhedrim, and scourged—went to Samaria, Lydda, Joppa, and Cesarea—defended his conduct towards Cornelius—delivered from Herod—attended the council at Jerusalem—reproved by St. Paul at Antioch—his writings, and death.

THOSE vows and professions of repentance, which are not accompanied with its genuine fruits, deserve no credit. Saint Peter received a particular injunction to prove his recovery, by confirming the faith of his brethren, and feeding the flock of Christ *. And an evidence was given through the whole succeeding part of his life, of a zeal unquestionably pure, and of a diligence which knew not, or complained not of fatigue. “The Acts of the Apostles” have put his character beyond a doubt: the twelve first chapters chiefly relate to him, and demonstrate by the strongest testimonies, that his contrition was sincere, and his subsequent conduct con-

* Luke xxii. 32. John xxi. 15.

sistent and honourable. Many circumstances may be concealed from us ; but enough is recorded, to shew, that he obtained forgiveness, and continued for many years an extensive blessing to the Church. As he lived, so we have reason to believe that he died, in the bold profession and defence of the Gospel. May they, whose cases resemble his, learn in like manner to walk more circumspectly in future, labour more abundantly to be useful in their generation, and exhort others to beware of those miscarriages, which have brought such anguish upon themselves !

When our Lord ascended into heaven with great triumph and glory, it is probable that Peter was one of those, who followed him with their eyes, till a cloud received him out of their sight ; it is certain, he was one of that faithful, though, little, band, which remained at Jerusalem in a state of holy fellowship, and anxious expectation of the promised blessing *. He it was, who addressed the Church upon the apostasy of Judas, shewing that the scriptures were fulfilled in him, and that his place among the Apostles should be supplied by a fresh election.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Ghost descended with miraculous influences upon all the twelve, but our attention is directed to St. Peter, more than to the others †. Though it does not appear that he was distinguished above the rest by superior powers, yet he stood forward with peculiar courage. He first opened the grand commission of the Gospel, and the effect of his preaching, on that memorable occa-

* Acts i. 9, 13, &c.

† ii. 14, &c.

sion, was most visible and extensive. In his solemn discourse to the people, he replied to the scandalous reproach, cast upon him and his brethren, and alleged, that the gift of tongues, which excited such astonishment, ought not to be ascribed to intoxication, but to the extraordinary effusion of the Spirit, which had been expressly foretold. By a most decided testimony, he maintained, that Jesus had wrought various unquestionable miracles, and, after being injuriously put to death, had been raised from the grave, according to David's prophetic description. He argued, that He, who expired on the cross, had taken his seat at the right hand of God, and, having fulfilled his own promise in communicating so large a measure of the Holy Ghost, had proved himself to be the true Messiah, the very Saviour, who should come into the world.

An immediate and deep impression was made upon the minds of the audience. Many expressed the most pungent anguish and terror, while they earnestly implored direction from the Apostles. Peter instantly called them to the exercise of repentance, required them to be baptized in token of their submission to Jesus and dependence on his merits, and encouraged them to expect from Him the gift of the Spirit. How venerable did the preacher appear, when, with a holy fervour of zeal and love, he stood and besought the surrounding multitudes to be saved from that perverse generation! O that all the ministers of Christ possessed the like ardour, and that the labours of those, who do exert themselves in the same honourable

nourable service, were crowned with similar success! Let them lift up the standard of the cross, and doubt not that God will prosper their efforts for the enlargement of his kingdom.

We insist not in this place on the various miraculous operations performed by the Apostles, nor on the happy state of charity, peace, and piety, in which the primitive Church lived together, as their very enemies observed with astonishment. That description would exhibit a pleasing picture, and strongly recommend our religion; but it does not immediately relate to the character of St. Peter.

Soon after the feast of Pentecost, he is again brought forwards on a very interesting occasion*. He went to the temple, in company with John, at the usual hour of prayer, when a poor man, who had been a cripple from his birth, solicited relief. "Silver and gold have I none," said this messenger of peace, "but such as I have give I thee: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,* rise up and walk." A perfect cure instantly succeeded; and so public was the case, that it excited general notice. Crowds of people flocked together, that they might see the wondrous persons, whose words had given feet to the lame.

Peter sought not their applause, and therefore eagerly seized the opportunity of turning off their attention from himself to his dear Lord and Master, whom he affectionately commended to their regard. He boldly charged them with the most heinous guilt,

* Acts iii. 1, &c.

in having crucified the Prince of life, and exhorted them to repent and believe on Him, who was raised from the dead, that they might receive pardon and peace. He argued, that Jesus had fulfilled their ancient prophecies, and justly demanded their submission. He stated the nature and excellence of the salvation proposed, declaring that their long expected Messiah was sent "to bless them, in turning away every one of them from their iniquities." A similar mode of address, from those who labour in the Gospel, will be at all times proper. They also "preach not themselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord *." It is of necessity, that they endeavour to fix upon the minds of their hearers a conviction of sin, without which the offer of deliverance will not meet with any cordial acceptance. They must cry aloud, "Repent ye, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord." They proclaim, that "the Redeemer is come to Zion," and, while they exhibit his inestimable benefits, they maintain, that those only can enjoy them, who "turn from transgression †."

The zealous exertions of the two Apostles provoked the resentment of the priests and rulers, and occasioned their own arrest and imprisonment ‡. But a great honour was put upon them, though cast into a dungeon. They had preached to good effect, as it appeared that the Church received a large increase through their word. On the day following they stood arraigned before the Sanhedrim, being called to an-

* 2 Cor. iv. 5.

† Isa. lix. 20.

‡ Acts iv. 1, &c.

swer for their conduct. Peter was the speaker, and displayed an uncommon degree of courage; but at this we do not wonder, when informed that he acted immediately and entirely under the influence of the Holy Ghost. He declared, that the cure of the lame man had been wrought by the power, and through faith in the name, of Jesus. Forgetting his own situation as a prisoner at the bar, or disregarding his safety, he charged his judges with the murder of his Lord, whom he asserted to be raised from the dead, and warned them that by Him alone salvation could be obtained.

Such undaunted fortitude in one, whom they had despised as a low and illiterate person, confounded the council, and they knew not what steps to take. However, they strictly enjoined him, not to presume to propagate the Christian doctrine: and, had the scheme been of human contrivance, it is probable that it would have been instantly defeated. But, as the work was of God, they could not overthrow it; their rage was vain, their threatenings ineffectual. Peter and John stood unmoved, and declared their determination never to desist from the cause, in which they were engaged, appealing even to this malignant assembly, for the justification of their conduct. "Whether it be right," said they, "in the sight of God, to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye." For that time they were dismissed, but with fresh menaces; and when they had joined their brethren, the whole company united in prayer. They spread their case before the Lord, and entreated Him still to support and prosper them in the propagation of the Gospel.

pel. Their petitions obtained an immediate and favourable answer: the Holy Spirit came upon them, perhaps with some external tokens as before, and enabled them with renewed vigour to persist in the service of their Master.

Do not such examples make us ashamed of our own timidity? Is it not necessary for us to be as firm and undaunted in the profession of the truth, as St. Peter was? Or, will it be right, in any instance, to hearken unto men, more than unto God? Yet are we not doing this, while by dishonourable compliances we seek to evade persecution? You, who love the Lord, being persuaded of the excellence of your cause, should possess an unshaken courage. Whatever your enemies may threaten, by prayer and faith commit yourselves to Him, whose you are, and whom you serve, and then you need not dread any consequences. He will communicate to you more abundant grace, which shall be sufficient to sustain you in the severest conflict.

The Church continued to increase and prosper; though the hypocrisy of some professed members produced a painful trial*. Ananias and Sapphira were convicted by St. Peter of the basest dissimulation, and instantly struck dead at his word. This circumstance, however, tremendous as it was, turned out "to the furtherance of the Gospel;" which more evidently appeared to be the cause of heaven. Our Apostle, in particular, was held in profound veneration: he wrought various wonderful cures, which are not-mi-

* Acts v. 1, &c.

nutely described; nay, his very shadow proved to many persons the means of miraculous recovery. Who, then, could refuse to be convinced, that these men were indeed the messengers of the living God?

Still the Jewish rulers opposed, and, being filled with violent indignation, cast all the Apostles together into the common prison. Yet no bonds could silence these witnesses of God's truth. An Angel rescued them from their confinement; and by his direction they proceeded to preach the same doctrine, as publicly and as earnestly as before. Again they were brought before the Sanhedrim; when the high priest expressed the keenest resentment, because they had despised the injunctions and threatenings of the council. Peter undertook to answer, in the name of his brethren; and maintaining, as on a former occasion, that no commands of men would exempt them from obedience to God, he boldly declared the grand principles of the Gospel before his judges. He was evidently more solicitous to save their souls, than procure his own deliverance, while he stated, that the very person, whom they had crucified as a vile malefactor, being raised from the dead, and exalted to the highest glory, as a Prince and a Saviour, was ready to dispense the blessings of repentance and forgiveness.

His address increased the rage of the audience; and a proposal was made to take away the life of these troublesome men. But after some consultation they were dismissed, having been first scourged, and again charged to preach no more in the name of Jesus.

This

This violence, however, damped neither their courage nor their joy. They accounted themselves peculiarly honoured in suffering for such a Master, and continued to declare his truth both in public and private, though with great apparent danger to themselves.

A more striking picture of Christian fortitude, faith, and zeal, cannot be exhibited. Do we not almost envy the chains and stripes of St. Peter and his companions? He has assured us, that, "if we be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are we; for the Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon us*." But have we ever felt the influence of the love of Jesus, so as to be willing to give up ease, liberty, and life, for his sake? Do we regard him, according to Peter's doctrine, as "the Stone, which is become the head of the corner?" Do we look up to him, as seated on his throne in heaven, and imparting, to every humble petitioner on earth, repentance and remission of sins?

The intrepidity of the Apostle, in the transactions now related, forms a strong contrast to that part of his conduct, when he was ashamed to confess his Lord before a servant maid. And to what shall we ascribe this difference? In his base denial of Christ we see the weakness and depravity even of good men, and their liability to fall by those very temptations, of which they are warned, and against which they have most strenuously resolved. But in his bold defence before the council we behold, not so much

* 1 Pet. iv. 14.

the natural impetuosity and constitutional courage of his mind, as the power of divine grace: we perceive that God can qualify his servants for the work assigned them, and support them in every danger. O let us learn to maintain an entire dependence upon Him, and he will help us according to our need!

A. D. After some time, the Apostles at Jerusalem, ³⁴ having heard that the inhabitants of Samaria had embraced the Gospel, sent Peter and John for the purpose of establishing them in the faith, and imparting to them some spiritual gifts *. Upon that occasion a singular case occurred. Simon, a noted magician, observing that the Holy Ghost was conferred by these two eminent teachers, ignorantly and impiously proposed to purchase the same power by a sum of money. Peter immediately rejected the offer with disdain, reproved his base hypocrisy, warned him of his danger, and earnestly exhorted him to repentance and prayer. He addressed himself to the sinner's conscience with plainness and fidelity. And will it not be allowed, that succeeding ministers should in like manner, without reserve, "declare all the counsel of God?"

Having preached in different parts of Samaria, he returned to Jerusalem. During his continuance in that city, he received a visit from the young convert and Apostle St. Paul; yet neither then, nor at any other time, was such a supremacy acknowledged in Peter, as the church of Rome pleads for †. No external perfe-

* Acts viii. 14--25.

† Acts ix. 27. Gal. i. 18.

cution preventing him, he soon afterwards took an extensive circuit, that he might spread the Gospel from town to town. "He passed through all quarters," testifying of Christ, and working miracles: so illustriously were the grace and power of God exhibited in him *!

To Eneas, a poor, afflicted paralytic, he spake in the name of his divine Master; and health and vigour were instantly restored. The astonishing cure was rendered more remarkable by the effects which it produced: the inhabitants of the town, which was called Lydda, "turned to the Lord." He was sent for to Joppa, which lay in that neighbourhood, on occasion of the death of an eminently pious woman, Tabitha, or Dorcas; and at his word, after solemn prayer to God, she revived. This extraordinary miracle, also, tended to the enlargement of the Church. Many were convinced, and received the Christian doctrine: Peter, therefore, continued with them for some time, that he might confirm them in the faith. How honourable and useful his employment! In some measure resembling his dear Lord, he "went about doing good," administering relief to the diseased in body, with a view to promote their spiritual and eternal welfare. O may we live under the influence of this holy and benevolent principle! Though we possess not miraculous powers, yet something may be effected in our respective places, for the honour of Christ, and the salvation of our fellow-creatures,

* Acts ix. 32, &c.

A. D. From Joppa St. Peter removed to Cefarea⁴¹ upon a singular occurrence, which introduces a most important history. "The Gospel of the circumcision was committed to him *," but it pleased God to distinguish him, also, as the first instrument of carrying the glad tidings to the Gentiles. And now the grand dispensation, the mystery, which had been kept secret for ages, began to be unfolded, "that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ †." The Apostles themselves were with difficulty persuaded to believe it, though it had been so expressly predicted by the ancient prophets. A particular revelation prepared the mind of Peter for proposing these high privileges to the Heathens, and removed his objections.

When he had retired for prayer about the middle of the day, according to the practice of devout persons, the Lord taught him by a visible representation, three times repeated, that the distinction of clean and unclean, appointed by the ceremonial law, was about to cease, and that what God had sanctified, he must not reject as common or polluted ‡. Just at that instant certain messengers from Cornelius, who had been sent by divine direction, enquired for the Apostle: and, that his Jewish prejudices might not prevent him, he received express instructions from the Spirit to go with them. If God evidently lead the way, we ought not to hesitate. Yet, alas! through perverse-

* Gal. ii. 7.

† Eph. iii. 6.

‡ Acts x. 1, &c.

ness, obstinacy, and many corrupt tempers, we are often unwilling to follow, even where the line of duty is accurately marked out. May the grace of our God render us obedient to his will, by whatever means it is made known!

Peter went to Cæsarea, and there shewed that he fought not his own glory, but that of his Master: sensible of what was due to him, and conscious of his own demerits, he declined the homage, which Cornelius imprudently offered. Many of the Centurion's friends were assembled to hear the doctrine of this extraordinary teacher. Accordingly, after stating on what grounds he had undertaken the journey, he proceeded to preach the Gospel to them without reserve. He declared his full conviction, that a way of access to God was opened for men of every nation: he insisted on the character and work of Jesus, on his life, death, resurrection, and the future judgment: he maintained, that, agreeably to God's revelations by his prophets from the beginning, remission of sins could now be obtained by all who believe in the Saviour's name. It pleased God to confirm the word, and prove undeniably that he would have the Gentiles admitted into his Church: for those purposes, the Holy Ghost immediately descended upon all the company. After such an attestation of divine acceptance, the Apostle could not be unwilling to receive them as his Christian brethren. He commanded them, therefore, to be baptized, and, at their earnest request, for their further instruction and advancement, he continued with them some days.

We rejoice, that the same blessed message of salvation is come even unto us, who were once in Pagan darkness, and that God still gives testimony to the preaching of his truth by the demonstration of his Spirit, though not in so extraordinary a manner. Pardon and peace are offered in the name of Jesus; and, by the faith of him, many among us, "who were sometime alienated, are now reconciled" to God. We should be glad to observe that others, as well as ourselves, are recovered, from whatever state, and by whatever means, they may be called. Though they were once of a different religion, or of no religion at all, we should exult in their salvation, like the Angels in heaven. If the Lord God has sealed them for his own by the Holy Ghost, who are we, that we should refuse them "the right hand of fellowship?"

The free communication of St. Peter with the Gentiles, as here related, gave offence to some of his Jewish brethren at Jerusalem*. But, upon his returning to that place, and explicitly declaring the matter, their vehement prejudices were in a great measure removed, and they adored the grace of God, which was imparted to the uncircumcised. Too frequently, alas! good men, through haste or bigotry, take umbrage at the conduct of others, whom they would cease to censure, if they properly understood their situation, and the grounds on which they act.

A. D. . After some time, a violent persecution arose
 44 against the Church. Herod Agrippa, that proud

* Acts xi. 1—18.

and cruel tyrant, having put James to death, cast Peter into prison, and commanded him to be kept under a strong guard, till he should be brought forth to public execution, for the entertainment of the people *. The Apostle, however, had numerous friends, who made continual intercession for him, not at the court of Herod, but before the throne of God : and their prayers procured his deliverance. Vain were all the precautions and means used for his confinement : the king's intention was frustrated, the expectation of the profane multitude disappointed. The very night preceding the day appointed for Peter's suffering, while he slept with composure, not dreading the event, an Angel appeared to rescue him. Instantly his chains fell off, the iron gates gave way, and, under the conduct of his heavenly guide, he went out through the midst of sentinels without interruption.

Just at that time many pious persons were actually engaged in offering up their supplications for the Apostle, when they were assured by his arrival amongst them, that they had obtained acceptance. After indulging his grateful and devout sensations with his friends and brethren, praising God for this extraordinary dispensation, he retired from them, seeking, probably, a more convenient retreat. His disappointed enemies were enraged at his escape, and the guards, who had been set over him, put to death in his stead. " Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty ; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints ! Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify

* Acts xii. 1—19.

thy name *?" He is "wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working," who "pleadeth the cause of his people †." He may suffer them to be oppressed through tyrants; yet in many remarkable cases he has displayed his regard for them, and proved, that "their Redeemer is strong ‡." The instance before us stands as a convincing token of his gracious attention to prayer. The importunate cries of the poor persecuted saints opened the prison doors, and delivered an Apostle. O let us be encouraged, in every distress, to make known our requests unto God, with greater frequency and fervour, and we shall surely prevail!

A. D. St. Peter is again introduced to our notice in ⁵² the grand council of the Church at Jerusalem. When the question was there agitated, whether obedience to the Mosaic law should be urged upon the believing Gentiles, he rose up and declared, how God had commissioned him to preach the Gospel to the uncircumcised, had given them the Holy Spirit, and purified their hearts by faith §. He argued, therefore, that, being received to the divine favour without ceremonial observances, they should be left to their full liberty; and he maintained the important doctrine, that none can be saved any otherwise than through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet, on one occasion afterwards, he acted inconsistently with his professed principles. At Antioch he lived on terms of Christian fellowship with the converted Gentiles, but at length withdrew from their

* Rev. xv. 3, 4.

† Isa. xxviii. 29. li. 23.

‡ Jer. l. 34.

§ Acts xv. 6—11.

society, through the fear of displeasing certain Jewish zealots, who came to that place*. This wavering conduct produced bad effects. Many, through the influence of his example, betrayed the same timidity; and, while he endeavoured to conciliate one side, he grieved and staggered another. St. Paul, therefore, sharply reproved him, representing, that from his behaviour it might seem, as if he did not consider the believing Gentiles in a state of acceptance, or had renounced the fundamental doctrine of justification by faith alone.

What shall we say to this instance of unsteadiness? We presume not to defend it; "because he was to be blamed." It does not appear, that he offered any excuse for himself, and we should hope, that he frankly confessed and immediately repented of his fault. The most eminent Apostles are not proposed as perfect patterns. They all discovered failings, and were liable to be again and again overcome by temptations, even as we are. Let us beware for ourselves. Are there not those among us, who are guilty of mean compliances, and who, not merely in one instance, but habitually, counteract the dictates of conscience, through fear of temporal inconveniences? Do we not too much consult the world, how far they will allow us to associate with serious Christians? Let us abhor dissimulation, and act an open and upright part. Whatever we may suffer, let us determine to "walk according to the truth of the Gospel," and not hesitate to shew our cordial attachment to the people of God.

* Gal. ii. 11, &c.

Peter betrayed a wrong spirit, and Paul was his reprover; a circumstance, which strongly confirms the doctrine, which they preached. If there had been any collusion, any cheat practised upon mankind, it would certainly have been discovered, when the two great champions differed. Yet even then they perfectly agreed in matters of opinion, and afterwards continued to maintain the same principles, and promote the same work, as “labourers together with God.”

The life of St. Peter was protracted to a considerable length, and spent in active exertions for the honour of his Master. It should seem, that his wife accompanied him in his travels, and that they both subsisted upon the bounty of others*. Some precious remains of his writings are transmitted to us; and by these he yet speaketh, and will speak to the end of time. His two Epistles were addressed to the dispersed Christians, for the purpose of comforting them in their troubles, confirming them in the faith, warning them against seducers, enlivening their hopes, and regulating their conduct. Let us study these inspired exhortations with serious attention, till they have produced their full influence upon our hearts. Surely we cannot refuse to listen to so venerable “an elder,” who was “a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed †.” Both these Epistles were composed in his old age, and they seem to be marked with its character: in the second especially, his language is that of one, who

* 1 Cor. ix. 5.

† 1 Pet. v. 1.

considered his dissolution as at hand, and who was taking leave of the world. Here, then, he has delivered his most solemn thoughts, in the near view of eternity. And did he waver in his mind? Did he renounce his principles? No: far otherwise. He desired most earnestly, that his instructions might be always remembered after his decease*: and, having described, with an astonishing grandeur and majesty, the destruction of the earth, and the appearance of Christ as the universal Judge, he added, “What manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God †!”

A. D. At length he finished his course in an honour-
 about
 67. able manner: he died a martyr, (it is thought when he was about seventy-five years old) and sealed with his blood the truth, which he had preached. His Lord had foretold, that he should be taken off by a violent death, even that of crucifixion ‡; and this came to pass under the tyranny of Nero. It is believed, that both he and St. Paul suffered at Rome about the same time, and that St. Peter was crucified with his head downwards, at his own desire, as if he thought himself unworthy to resemble his Master. Be that as it may, he now appears in glory, where, amongst all “the noble army of martyrs §,” he will admire and praise his God and Saviour, and reign with him for ever and ever.

Many Prophets, Apostles, and ministers, have lost their lives in vindication of the Gospel; but, while

* 2 Pet. i. 15. † iii. 11, 12. ‡ John xxi. 18, 19. § Te Deum.

we lament the removal of such able advocates, we rejoice that God will plead his own cause, and make the word of his grace to prosper from age to age. We would enquire of every reader, and entreat him earnestly to put the question to himself, Is not that system of faith, for which St. Peter died, worthy of attention? Or, "how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" Desire, then, to know and feel the excellency of those principles, for the defence of which so much has been done and suffered: according to the exhortation of this inspired writer, "give diligence to make your calling and election sure *."

* 2 Pet. i. 10.

SAINT JOHN

THE APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST.

CHAP. VI.

John, his parentage and occupation—called by Christ—appointed an Apostle—was present at the transfiguration—forbad one casting out devils—proposed to consume the Samaritans—petitioned for the highest place—attended his Lord at the last passover, in Gethsemane, and at the cross—was the first who believed the resurrection—laboured with Peter at Jerusalem, and in Samaria—banished to Patmos—preached and died at Ephesus—his Gospel, Epistles, and Revelations.

ALL the Apostles of Jesus, excepting the traitor, possessed a real excellence of character; yet in some of them we may trace a difference. They believed and felt the same principles, and were endowed with equal integrity, whilst the natural temper of each gave a bias to his conduct and a trait to his manners, which distinguished him from the rest of his brethren, and which enhanced or diminished the value of his friendship. God gives his grace to men, whose inclinations and habits are unlike, and they are blessed with the same salvation, yet, as the ordinary varieties of the human mould still remain in them, their virtue is more or less

engaging and attractive. The eleven were all, but not equally, dear to their Master: some obtained marks of his peculiar esteem. We presume not to censure his conduct, or to demand the reasons on which he acts. If Christ, who took our nature, yielded not to those sensations, which incline us to prefer one companion to another, yet He is the sovereign Lord, and has a right to bestow his favours, when and as he pleases. Three of those, whom he had chosen out of the world, were honoured above the rest by his attention: and, of these three, one was admitted to a nearer intimacy, and a larger share of his regard. This was he, whose history is now introduced to our notice, and who is so frequently described by that expression, "the disciple, whom Jesus loved." St. John, it is allowed, possessed an uncommon sweetness of temper; and, perhaps, as we have hinted, that strong affection, and close union which subsisted between him and his Lord, may be ascribed to their reciprocal feelings, occasioned by the similarity of their dispositions. Certain it is, that in proportion as we cultivate the spirit of love, we shall enjoy a familiarity of intercourse with Christ. An imitation of this favoured Apostle will, likewise, bring credit to our profession of the Gospel, and add much to the peace and happiness of our own souls.

The followers of Jesus were chiefly such as obtained not any high distinction among men. He makes no account of the embellishments, which catch the notice and admiration of the world: he passes by many of elevated rank, and "exalteth them of low degree." The parentage of John was mean; his situation

situation in life, obscure. His brother James and he were sons of Zebedee, a fisherman at Bethsaida in Galilee, and brought up to the same occupation. These two were partners with Peter and Andrew in the concerns of their trade, and commenced their attendance upon the Saviour at the same time *. Being struck with amazement at the miraculous draught of fishes, which had been taken under the direction of Jesus, they were instantly disposed to obey his call. At his word they forsook their father, their vessels, and employment; and, becoming his stated followers, were prepared for the Apostleship, to which they were soon afterwards appointed. The summons, pronounced by Christ, being accompanied by the influence of his Spirit, prevented or removed from their minds every objection. Thus also, in general, the people, who enter upon his service, are "willing in the day of his power †" to undergo every difficulty for his sake. Let us pray with our Church, that, after this example, we may forsake all worldly and carnal affections, and be evermore ready to follow God's holy commandments through Jesus Christ our Lord ‡.

The two brothers, probably, resembled each other in disposition, and are so frequently mentioned together, that we shall find many of the same things related of them both. When ordained to the Apostleship, they were called by one name, "Boanerges," or "The sons of thunder §." The appellation, we presume, does not imply that the manner of their address

* Matt. iv. 21, 22. Luke v. 10, 11. † Psal. cx. 3. ‡ Collect for St. James the Apostle.

§ Mar. iii. 17.

was terrific, which would be inconsistent with the gentle and loving spirit of St. John, but it denotes, rather, the fervour of their zeal, and the efficacy of their preaching, which, like thunder, shook many hearts, and overcame the strongest opposition. O for men of this description, to stand forth as advocates for Christ in the present age!

John is supposed to have been the youngest of the Apostles, and appointed to the sacred function, when he was not more than twenty-six years old. It is truly desirable to give up the heart to God, and begin his work, in early life; that our best days and the vigour both of body and mind may be devoted to his service. How much mischief might thus be prevented, what extensive usefulness promoted!

St. John was one of the three honoured companions of Christ, who were admitted to behold him in his glory on the mount of transfiguration*. Probably, from that heavenly vision he was led with greater earnestness to contemplate and admire his divine Master, of whose dignity he had received such a transcendent proof. He recommended him, therefore, to the regard of others, from a clear knowledge of his person, and an attentive consideration of his excellency. Thus he writes, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the word of life, declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us †."

* Matt. xvii. 1.

† 1 John i. 1—3.

Yet even in John, who enjoyed the most intimate communications with the Saviour, we perceive the depravity of human nature. He felt the conflict, arising from "the flesh lusting against the Spirit," and discovered some failings that we should not have expected in an Apostle, and especially in one so much distinguished for his meekness and love. What other conclusion can we draw, than this, "Let no man glory in men *?"

On a certain occasion, whilst Jesus inculcated humility, John seemed to be convinced of acting unsuitably to his temper; at least, he desired to know, whether his conduct had been consistent. He observed, that he and some other of the disciples had seen a person casting out devils in the name of Christ, and forbidden him to prosecute that service, merely because he belonged not to their company †. This, evidently, betrayed a narrowness and bigotry of mind, and, as it deserved, met with a reproof. The admonition, which was now delivered, teaches us, that those, who profess a real regard to, and dependence on, the Saviour, and who promote his cause, ought not to be rashly censured or discouraged, though they associate not with us, and though in some respects they differ from our sentiments. Alas! there are few, who possess that extensive liberality, which our religion calls for. Are we not all prone to condemn such, as accord not exactly with our system, and comply not with our forms, even where we are forced to acknowledge, that they

* 1 Cor. iii. 21. † Mar. ix. 33—40. Luke ix. 49, 50.

obey the same Master, and exert themselves for the subversion of Satan's kingdom?

Upon our Lord's journey to Jerusalem, certain Samaritans refused to entertain him, through their hatred of the Jewish nation*. John and his brother considered this insolent treatment as deserving of the severest punishment, and proposed, after the example of Elijah, to call down upon the offenders fire from heaven. Doubtless, they acted under the habitual influence of love to Christ and zeal for his name, yet at that time they were instigated by resentment and a warmth of passion, which cannot be justified. Jesus, therefore, sharply rebuked their rashness and impetuosity, as inconsistent with the nature of his religion and the benevolent object of his mission. "The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And shall his followers be furious and vindictive, or pursue their adversaries with bitter execrations? Will any insults or injuries vindicate such a temper? Will you plead, under a vehemence of this sort, that you are actuated by a pure regard to God and his truth? Alas! you deceive yourselves: "ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of." Far different are the weapons, which you should use in contending against infidels and heretics. "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God †." O study the genius of the Gospel, and the tendency of its principles! Is not its main design to promote peace and salvation? And has not the great Founder of your faith exhibited an astonishing

* Luke ix. 51—56.

† James i. 20.

example of forgiveness and kindness to enemies? How, then, does it appear, that you have learned Christ, while you burn with resentment and indignation?

The warmth of our Apostle upon this occasion must be ascribed, in part at least, to his prejudice against the Samaritans, whom he had been taught to hate from his youth. He had often seen his Master insulted, and treated with greater contumely by the Scribes and Pharisees; and yet he had never expressed a wish to call down fire upon them. So great is the force of education! Still, it must be allowed, the furious proposal, coming from one of so sweet a disposition as St. John, is perfectly unaccountable, except we acknowledge the corrupt state of human nature, even in the regenerate. Thus, also, it appears, that many of the saints of God, in certain circumstances of temptation, have acted in direct opposition to those habits and tempers, for which they are most distinguished. When we read of intemperance in Noah, anger in Moses, impatience in Job, cowardice in Peter; shall we wonder, that some sparks of resentment remained even in John? Let us beware for ourselves, and consider by what principles we are influenced: "He that trusteth in his own heart, is a fool*."

We are obliged to take notice of another instance, in which the lustre of this eminent character was obscured. When our Lord was travelling to Jerusalem for the last time, and had just foretold his approaching

* Prov. xxviii. 26.

passion, the Apostles James and John preferred a petition, through the mediation of their mother, that they might be appointed to the highest posts in his kingdom *. The request arose from their carnal notions of the Messiah's erecting a temporal dominion, and evidently favoured of an ambitious spirit. It was particularly strange and preposterous, that they should lay their schemes for worldly advancement, when informed that their Master was about to suffer the utmost extremity. A reproof was necessary; and accordingly the Saviour reprehended them, though with peculiar mildness. "Ye know not," said he, "what ye ask." Ah! how often do we come under this condemnation! Through the prevalence of wrong affections "we ask amiss;" and God in great mercy refuses to grant our supplications.

Jesus enquired of them, "Are ye able to drink of the cup, that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism, that I am baptized with?" Or in other words, "Can you take part with me in those tremendous afflictions, which I am going to endure?" They did not wish to decline the most painful service; but it was probably ignorance and self-confidence, which dictated the reply, "We are able." He warned them to expect the severe conflict, and observed, that the disposal of future honours must be left to the sovereign pleasure of God. Agreeably to this prediction, they were honoured with a share in their Master's sufferings: John with bonds, stripes, imprisonment, and exile; and James with a speedy martyrdom.

* Matt. xx. 17—23. Mar. x. 32—40. Luke xviii. 31—34.

Christians, you perceive from this example, that though in the sincerity of your hearts you have relinquished all for the Gospel's sake, you may still be tempted to entertain improper thoughts and desires through covetousness or ambition. Can you so boast of your own strength, as to suppose yourselves incapable of being actuated by any carnal motives? Rather, do you not feel such corrupt affections, as cover you with confusion, and almost overwhelm you with distress? This part of our history may afford you some relief. We do not vindicate, what is in any measure opposite to a holy, spiritual frame of mind. But it may still encourage your hope to observe, that those, who were dear to God and eminent in his service, sometimes betrayed strange inconsistencies. Let the subject, however, produce real humiliation, and excite you to constant circumspection. Being apprized of your danger, you should implore assistance.

There are those, who seem to exult in the failings of good men, as if they proved the whole system of religion to be a cheat and delusion. But how unfair, as well as impious, is such a conduct! We allow, that even the Apostles felt some degree of prejudice, ambition, and resentment: but does this concession detract from the general excellence of their character? On the contrary, does not true candour require us to say, that they have evinced their integrity, by declaring their own defects?

Will you maintain, that, because the saints of God are not perfect, you, who resolutely persevere in the practice of sin, are as safe as they? Is there not an
essential

essential difference? Their habitual aim and delight is to do the will of God; your's, to gratify your corrupt nature, in opposition to Him. They are humbled and grieved for their failures in duty; you justify a continual system of transgression, and imitate them only in those things, which they deeply lament, and consider as a disgrace to their profession. How totally dissimilar! The comparison cannot flatter your pride: it shews the odiousness of your prevailing temper, and the danger, to which your souls are exposed.

Jesus reproved the improper desires of his beloved disciple, but did not withdraw his kindness. John still remained his constant attendant, and most intimate friend. He was sent in company with Peter to prepare the passover*: and during the last solemn celebration of that festival, it is remarked, that John leaned on the bosom of his dear Lord; that is, according to their posture at table, he sat the nearest†. In that place, which was granted him as a token of peculiar affection, he could propose questions, unperceived by the rest: and accordingly, having asked, who was the traitor, he first received the intimation, that Judas was the man.

St. John was admitted into the garden of Gethsemane, at the time when the Saviour, retiring for secret prayer, endured his tremendous agony‡. There also, like Peter and James, this favoured Apostle betrayed a very sinful remissness, and spent in sleep the precious moments, which ought to have been improved in holy watchfulness and fervent devotion. It is acknow-

* Luke xxii. 8. † John xiii. 23—26. ‡ Matt. xxvi. 36—46.
ledged,

ledged, too, that, when his Lord was apprehended, he, as well as the other disciples, forsook him and fled, in violation of the most solemn promises *. Yet, being soon recovered from his fears, he followed him to the place of trial, and stood there a silent witness of the contempt and cruelty, with which he was treated.

When Jesus was nailed to the cross, exposed to all the insults and outrage of the people, John had the fortitude to continue by him, even to the last, and, probably, was the only Apostle, who did so †. His constancy and fidelity were well compensated. His dying Master looked on him and gave him a signal token of regard. He requested his dear mother to consider this beloved disciple as her own son, and commended her also, in her disconsolate state, to the care of John. There is at all times, a claim in wretchedness to protection and relief. But the present was a peculiar affliction, exciting peculiar sympathies. The parent of the holy sufferer, in those moments, when every bequest is sacred, was committed to the Apostle, as a mother claiming his support. He acknowledged the obligation and the trust, received her to his house, and treated her with all filial tenderness and respect. Shall not we, likewise, learn to maintain a firm attachment to the Saviour, be mindful of his solemn injunctions, and esteem ourselves honoured in fulfilling them? Though we can shew no personal kindness to him or his parent, yet he has constituted the poor as his representatives, and intrusted them

* Matt. xxvi. 56.

† John xix. 26, 27.

to us. Let none of his people refuse or neglect the charge.

When Christ was risen from the dead, our Apostle, accompanied by Peter, ran with eager haste to examine the sepulchre, upon the report of Mary Magdalene. It should seem, that from his view of the place, and of the orderly disposition of the burial clothes, he was the first who believed the important fact of the resurrection*. On the evening of the same day, he was one of the assembly, to whom Jesus appeared: but, probably, he was not favoured with any separate vision of him; nor could that be needful, if, as we suppose, his faith was sufficiently confirmed. When fishing with certain disciples on the sea of Tiberias, he first recollected the person of his Lord, who called to them from the shore†. A remarkable interview ensued, at the close of which we are struck with one circumstance, which evinced his humility, love, and zeal. When Peter received an injunction to attend the Saviour, John waited not for any such express direction, but instantly rose up, as if eager to shew his attachment, and with silent meekness followed‡. Let us examine, whether we possess a readiness of this kind, to go after Christ, wherever he shall lead the way. When he is pleased to intimate his will, are there no hesitations, no delays, or misgivings? Our conduct, more than our professions, should declare our desire to enter on his service.

The curiosity of Peter, respecting John's future

* John xx. 1—10. See West on the Resurrection. † John xxi. 1, &c. ‡ See Dodd. Expos. vol. ii. Sect. 201.

destination,

destination, was immediately checked by that singular reply; "If I will, that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" It was concluded from this expression, that the Apostle should not die: but the opinion arose from a mistaken interpretation. It seemed, however, to be implied, that he was designed to be spared in the Church, till the coming of Christ for the destruction of Jerusalem. The event, at least, was such: he was one of those, who did not taste of death, till the kingdom of God, in that awful dispensation, was accomplished *. Whatever changes may await us, let us leave ourselves and all our concerns to our Lord's disposal. Only let us follow him without reserve, as did this man of God, and endeavour to employ our time usefully and honourably, whether a longer or a shorter space may yet remain.

After the ascension of Christ, St. John appeared more conspicuous, and, probably, shone with greater splendour, than before. He is described, as continuing in holy fellowship with his brethren, resolutely adhering to the cause of his Master, amidst formidable dangers, boldly and vigorously pursuing the grand objects of his sacred function. On the day of Pentecost, he, together with the other Apostles, received the miraculous effusion of the Spirit, and was employed in gathering in the remarkable harvest, when three thousand souls were converted. He is exhibited to our notice, as the companion of St. Peter in many of his labours and persecutions. They two were going up to worship at the temple, when the lame man attracted

* Matt. xvi. 28.

their benevolent regard, and experienced their power of healing *. They were preaching to the people, when the priests and rulers apprehended them, and cast them into prison †. With undaunted courage they stood together before the council, despised their threatenings, and expressed a firm determination “to obey God rather than men.” Again they were thrust into a dungeon, and rescued by an Angel ‡. Being scourged and menaced, they rejoiced in the honour, to which they were called, “and daily in the temple, and in every house they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.”

St. John, likewise, was commissioned as the associate of Peter, to go down from Jerusalem to confirm the young converts in Samaria §. There they imparted spiritual gifts, and declared the tidings of peace and salvation through the Redeemer’s name, in many towns and villages. The chief residence of our Apostle was at Jerusalem, where St. Paul distinguished him as one of the main pillars of the church ||. But after some time he removed to Ephesus, and thence took his circuits for the promulgation of the Gospel in Asia, “labouring in word and doctrine,” and establishing many Christian societies †. At length, when the Roman Emperor Domitian raised a violent persecution, it is said that John was sent to Rome, that he might be put to death, and, being plunged into a caldron of boiling oil, came out unhurt. Whether or no that tradition be well founded, he was banished to

* Acts iii. 1, &c. † iv. 1, &c. ‡ v. 17, &c. § viii. 14—25.

|| Gall. ii. 9.

† See Cave’s Lives of the Apostles.

Patmos, a small island in the Egean sea, condemned, as he himself affirms, "for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ *." In that dreary situation he continued for nearly two years, and then, upon Domitian's decease, returned to his charge at Ephesus, where he long remained a blessing to the church, a faithful witness and strenuous advocate for the truth of the Gospel.

It is recorded, that at a very advanced age, being unable to walk or preach, he was constantly carried to the public assemblies, and there exhorted the people by that short sentence, so expressive of his general spirit, "My little children, let us love one another." At last, though in his life he had suffered severer agonies than the pains of martyrdom, he died in peace, having been wonderfully preserved from violence, for the benefit of others, till he had attained almost a hundred years.

Let us admire and praise the grace of God, exhibited in this eminent Apostle, and consider our obligations to imitate his example. There are those, perhaps, who plead, that they are not called to the same high function. But do you, therefore, justify your carnal affections and pursuits? Or do you think it allowable, in a private situation, to be proud, selfish, indolent, and revengeful? If you profess Christianity, you ought to be followers of St. John, so far as to manifest similar dispositions. In your place, and according to your measure, you should be kind and gentle, bold and active, faithful and persevering in the service of Christ.

* Rev. i. 9.

But if the corrupt desires of the flesh predominate in your minds, if you love the world and the things of the world, if you are ashamed of, or averse to, the exercises of devotion, your pretences to religion are vain.

Our Apostle lived to see the Gospel propagated to a large extent, yea, through the greater part of the known world. But he beheld, also, the corruption, as well as the increase, of the Christian Church. Many pernicious errors were, even in that early age, broached and disseminated, relating to the person of the Redeemer: among other false doctrines, that was the chief, which denied his Divinity. An opinion so dangerous could not but excite the notice and grief of this venerable preacher of the faith: and accordingly, in the ardour of his love to God and men, he set himself to oppose it with firmness. "This," said he, "is that spirit of Antichrist, whereof you have heard, that it should come, and even now already is it in the world*." Ought we not to lament, that ancient heresies are revived in the present day, and threaten to deluge our land? Or shall we be indifferent about the consequence? Is it of no importance, in what light the Saviour is regarded? Whether he be worshipped and adored as God over all, or degraded into a mere man like ourselves? Where is our fidelity, where our zeal for the truth?

* 1 John iv. 3. See Dr. Horsley's Charge and Letters, in which it is proved, that St. John's assertions were expressly levelled against those who denied the Deity of Christ, as well as against them, who allowed not his humanity.

We bless God for the writings of the Apostle, which will enable us to resist and confute the erroneous and destructive representations of perverse and ungodly men. He was honoured in being employed as one of the sacred authors of the New Testament: and, while we confess that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God," and claim its regard, we perceive a peculiar sweetness, spirituality, and sublimity in St. John's compositions. Probably for the clear and comprehensive revelations, with which he was favoured, the profound mysteries, which he has delivered, and the heavenly manner, in which he has treated them, he has been called the Divine.

His Gospel was published after all the others, not only for the purpose of recording many things, which they had omitted, but with an especial view to oppose the heresies of the Gnostics, and to assert the Godhead of Christ. He introduces the history with an elevated preface, in which he has explicitly declared the excellency and Deity of his Master; and he relates many of those wonderful discourses, which prove and display the supreme perfections of Jesus. He bears a decided testimony, even towards the close of life, not only that the Word, which was made flesh, originally was with God and was God, but also that he himself "beheld his glory," and "received of his fulness*." Let us pray for more enlarged conceptions of "the great mystery of godliness;" and, as we advance in the knowledge and love of Christ, these

* John i. 1—16.

authentic memorials will become more and more precious in our estimation.

The Epistles of St. John discover the distinguishing part of his character. Must not every reader acknowledge, that the inspired author breathed nothing but love? And is not this allowed to be the peculiar badge of our profession? Yet alas! we lament that contrary dispositions prevail in the Christian world. What confusion is produced among us by envy, strife, and revenge? We would, therefore, enforce the exhortations of the Apostle: "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God: He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love *." According to this decision, but few have attained the right knowledge of the Gospel, and those, who have made the greatest progress, have yet much more to learn.

The sublime and mysterious book of the Revelations was written by St. John during his banishment in the isle of Patmos. The Lord God vouchsafed to favour him with singular visions and discoveries, and to place him, as it were, on the verge of heaven, when excluded from human society. The counsels of Jehovah, respecting future ages, were declared to him: and these he has faithfully recorded. Here, then, is exhibited a series of prophecy, which unfolds the grand schemes of Providence, even to the end of the world. May we read and contemplate with holy reverence and admiration!

* 1 John iv. 7, 8.

The glories of the celestial state were, in some measure, disclosed to the Apostle's view. He saw the throne of God, and heard the high praises of the Redeemer, which are continually chanted by innumerable myriads of saints and Angels. No other part of the Bible contains such exalted descriptions of God and his kingdom, as this inspired book. Do they not excite wonder, love, and joy? Should we not exult in the prospect of that felicity, which is here brought before us? Or, can we be content with that poor, sordid satisfaction, which the earth affords? Rather, are we not wearied and disgusted with its best possessions? And do we not long to join "the glorious company of the Apostles," who are now admitted into the beatific presence of God? We dare not say, who out of this number is accounted first in dignity: but we presume, that He, who by way of eminence was styled "the disciple whom Jesus loved," is placed near to his adorable Lord.

However bright were the views of St. John in this life, yet they were comparatively faint and obscure. He saw "through a glass darkly;" but now he sees "face to face*." Now he is favoured with clearer and larger discoveries of the glory of God and the mystery of redemption: and now he better understands the excellency of "the holy Jerusalem," in which is "the throne of God and of the Lamb†." That exalted state is prepared, not for the Apostles only, but, as we trust, for many among ourselves. Do you aspire to that high honour? You must possess a meetness for it: you must

* 1 Cor. xiii. 12.

† Rev. xxii. 3.

have the seal of God in your foreheads; you must wash your robes, and make them white in the blood of the Lamb *. Like St. John, cultivate an intercourse with Jesus, and apply for fresh communications out “of his fulness,” even “grace for grace †.” Be willing to labour and to suffer for him, till you finish your course on earth, and then you shall shortly join with Prophets and Apostles in that elevated song, “Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever ‡.” Amen.

* Rev. vii. 3, 14.

† John i. 16.

‡ Rev. v. 13.

HEROD ANTIPAS.

CHAP. VII.

Herod Antipas, his rank and character—his incestuous marriage—imprisoned John Baptist—yet revered him—heard him gladly—and made a partial reformation—was restrained from destroying him, through fear of the people—at length beheaded him—was afraid of his being raised from the dead—threatened Jesus—examined and insulted him—died in exile.

HUMAN nature will be found the same, under all the variety of circumstances, in which it can be placed. If, therefore, we compare past and present times, or take a view of different situations in life, we may expect that similar characters will occur to our observation. But, while we remark, in what respects others have failed, or by what temptations they have been overcome, may we be warned from their examples, and avoid those snares, which have already proved so fatal!

One of exalted rank is now introduced to our notice; yet, possibly, a near resemblance of him may be traced in persons of a lower condition. It is Herod, surnamed Antipas, of whom certain particulars are related by the Evangelists. He was the son of that

Herod, called the Great, who fought the destruction of the infant Saviour, and massacred the children at Bethlehem. This man possessed only a part of his father's dominions, over which he presided merely as the vicerent of the Roman Emperor, with the title of Tetrarch or King of Galilee. Historians are agreed, that he was a prince of licentious and abandoned conduct, of which, indeed, sufficient proofs are given. We shall confine ourselves to those circumstances, which the scriptures have recorded: and, agreeably to this short account, he will appear to have opposed the most solemn warnings and strong convictions, and sacrificed every principle to the gratification of his lust. May we be aware of our own danger, and learn to restrain those sensual desires, "which war against the soul!"

Herod had divorced his own wife, and joined himself to another by an adulterous and incestuous connection: he had married the wife of his brother Philip, after having basely seduced her from her husband. This led to various enormities, and produced complicated troubles. John the Baptist, being sent for to Herod's court, probably from motives of curiosity, perceived, and dared not to connive at, the sinful practices of the king. The preacher sought not his favour, and feared not his displeasure. As a bold advocate for God, not "having respect to persons," he brought a heavy charge of guilt against the royal hearer, and reprehended him with fidelity and plainness, "for all the evils which he had done *." This was not a ge-

* Matt. xiv. 3—5. Mar. vi. 17—20. Luke iii. 19, 20.

neral invective against his immoralities: a particular application was made to his conscience, for the continued commission of adultery and incest. John declared his connection with Herodias to be highly criminal, and called upon him to put away the woman, with whom the laws both of God and man forbid him to cohabit.

What was the effect of this honest address? Alas! reproofs are seldom well received. Do not most persons rise with anger against him, who is so much their friend as to tell them of their faults? What, then, could be expected from an imperious and licentious prince? There are few, who dare to rebuke sin in a palace: it is the unhappy prerogative of dignity, to be considered as above control. Those, who possess an exalted station, are apt to spurn with indignation at any restraint, which an inferior, and especially a preacher, may attempt to impose. But resentment, on such occasions, is not confined to kings: we perceive that many in lower life are incapable of bearing any sharp reprehension. Have we not been displeased with the faithful admonitions of a companion or minister? Have we not desired to hear no more of such unpleasant subjects, and, instead of profiting by the serious counsel, meditated revenge against its author? But, surely, we are our own enemies, when we quarrel with those, who from pure benevolence point out to us "all the evils which we have done," and charge us to relinquish, what we cannot lawfully retain.

Herod was enraged, and his officers were immedi-

ately commissioned to bind and imprison the Baptist. It is remarked, that he "added yet this above all," as if it were the greatest of all his enormities, "that he shut up John in prison." The persecution of God's servants, for the upright and zealous performance of their duty, is an offence peculiarly heinous: and He, whose cause they plead, will avenge the injury. The opposition, as in the case before us, generally arises from the uneasiness, which sinners feel, upon a bold and unreserved representation of their guilt and danger. O that their anger were turned against themselves, and not against their reprove; that they would endeavour, not to silence him, but to reform their own evil conduct! If Herod had understood his true happiness or interest, he would have embraced John as his best friend; and the ministry of that good man might have been continued for a much longer period.

Yet there were some favourable appearances in Herod; and it may seem a matter of wonder, that the strong convictions, which he felt, were so transient or inefficacious. His adulterous queen was more incensed than he, and, from the first, wished to destroy the Baptist. Probably, she apprehended, that, through the preacher's admonitions, she should lose her influence, and be dismissed with disgrace. She, therefore, urged the king not merely to imprison but to kill him, that they might no longer be troubled with his insolence. To this proposal, however, Herod would not yield an immediate compliance: he was restrained by a powerful impression upon his mind. "He feared John, knowing that he

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was a just man, and an holy." This circumstance demands our attention. The Lord God put an honour upon his faithful servant, and made him respectable in chains, even before the most enraged enemies. Such a power very frequently accompanies eminent examples of godliness. It keeps in awe, and often terrifies, the persons, who are disposed to persecute. Herod was struck with reverence for the man, whom he had cast into a dungeon, and, under the view of John's singular holiness, probably perceived his own baseness, so as to be distressed with painful apprehensions.

The prisoner, it should seem, was not afraid of the king. What have those to dread, who have the Lord Jehovah on their side? They possess a never-failing source of confidence and joy, and may, therefore, exult in defiance of their most violent opposers, though racks and tortures be prepared for their destruction. Be of good courage, you who follow the Lamb, and be "not terrified by your adversaries," whatever strength or authority they may boast of. They themselves, perhaps, may be inwardly dismayed, at the very time when they appear most formidable. That furious prince and persecutor, "Saul, was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him *." Only let your enemies perceive in you a consistent and exemplary conduct; and then, however they may affect to reproach, they cannot really despise you. We may appeal to them, if there is not one or another, whom they dislike for his religion, and yet

* 1 Sam. xviii. 12.

cannot look at without a secret awe and terror on their minds, "knowing him to be a just man and an holy." At some times it appears, that under this impression, they would relinquish every worldly enjoyment, if they might exchange conditions. O that they would yield to their own convictions, drop their opposition against those, whom in their consciences they believe to be the objects of divine regard, and cordially join with them in zealous exertions for the cause of God and his truth!

Herod was not merely restrained from violence, by a reverence for the Baptist; it should seem, that he listened to his instructions, even after his imprisonment. Probably he sent for him, as Felix did for Paul *, "and communed with him." We conclude, also, that he paid attention to his doctrine; for it is expressly said, that he "observed him," and, what is still more remarkable, that he "heard him gladly." On certain occasions, at least, his affections were much moved: he could not but commend and admire the honesty of the preacher, and perhaps would have shewn no resentment, if one particular subject had been avoided.

Some may enquire, How can persons, of such a character as Herod, receive any pleasure from the plain and faithful declarations of God's word? Possibly, the speaker may be approved; his abilities, address, or elocution may excite notice and applause, even where the principles he maintains, and the practical exhortations he delivers, are not regarded. The

* Acts xxiv, 26.

novelty, importance, and sublimity of the things chiefly insisted on, may seem for a time to entertain and interest the hearers, who may, therefore, be induced to take great pains in frequenting the divine ordinances. This may be the case, where no spiritual affections are exercised, where the grand peculiarities of the Gospel are not understood, and no effectual application made to the conscience. O beware of resting in such a superficial attendance! Think it not enough to distinguish truth from error, or to discover a fervour of zeal for right doctrines: be not satisfied in feeling admiration and delight, while the awful mysteries of redemption are exhibited, and "good tidings of great joy" are announced. If you experience no godly sorrow for sin, no warm attachment to the Saviour, no renovation of heart by the Spirit; the sermons, which you hear, may afford you entertainment, but will not promote your salvation.

This is indeed a tremendous case; and yet it has frequently occurred. Of such auditors the Lord God thus warned the prophet Ezekiel: "Lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not*." Many of like description attended on the Saviour. Multitudes of men and women expressed such delight in listening to his doctrine, that they travelled after him with much weariness and expense: yet many of them entirely forsook him; and some, who had, probably, sung hosanna to his name, soon afterwards cried

* Ezek. xxxiii. 32.

out with extreme malignity, "Crucify him, crucify him." John the Baptist had other hearers of this sort, besides Herod, who, as our Lord testified, "were willing for a season to rejoice in his light*." At first, they were so struck with his solemn declarations of the Messiah's approach, as to be transported with wonder and joy. But, when he boldly reprov'd their iniquitous conduct, and called them to the practice of mortification, they basely calumniated his ministry, and exclaimed, "He hath a devil †."

Herod, however, advanced farther than merely expressing an admiration of the preacher; he was roused to action, and attempted a reformation. Convinced of the necessity of a change, "he did many things," relinquish'd many of his evil habits, and applied himself to the performance of various duties. This appeared promising indeed. But Herodias was still retained: he would not renounce his connection with that infamous woman; and thus he betrayed the unsoundness of his heart. The real convert rests not in a partial amendment of life: he will abhor and forsake one sin as well as another, and yield a sincere and uniform regard to every known precept. If, then, under the awakening influence of the word of God, you profess to be penitents, examine faithfully whether you are "new creatures." Has an universal renovation been produced? Are you determined, by divine grace, to put away all ungodliness? Have you made no reserve? Do you plead for no exception? Is there not a "sin, which easily besets you,"

* John v. 35.

† Luke vii. 33.

and to which, from your constitution or situation, you are most exposed? Is this, what you are willing to abandon? This is, more than any other, the Herodias, which must be divorced: for, if the favourite passion still retain its ascendancy, where is your deliverance from the love and power of iniquity?

Perhaps, there is no carnal affection more ensnaring, or more generally fatal, than lust. To what horrible ravages has it given rise? Many have been gradually allured by it from one transgression to another, till they have been led into such enormities of conduct, as they once thought themselves incapable of committing. What will not men sacrifice to the gratification of their libidinous desires? They will disregard their interest, health, and reputation, violate the strongest ties and engagements, despise every admonition, oppose their own convictions, and, even while they feel the worth of their immortal souls, obstinately plunge into final perdition. What a grievous infatuation is this! Herod is but one, out of thousands, who will have to lament for ever a fond attachment to a shameless woman. How just is that description of the adulteress: "She hath cast down many wounded; yea, many strong men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death *."

Let us mark the event with the king of Galilee. Highly as he revered the Baptist, he was at length persuaded to consent to his death, probably through the importunate entreaties of Herodias. Yet, for a

* Prov. vii. 26, 27.

time, he was prevented from proceeding to any act of violence. "He feared the people," who universally regarded John as a prophet, and might have raised a general sedition, to avenge his murder. What? did he not fear to wound his own conscience, to shed innocent blood, provoke the fierce anger of the Lord, and destroy his precious soul? No: but he dreaded the resentment of a mob. A poor motive indeed! Yet it is well for society, that sinners are, in any way, restrained from effecting their purposes. Frequently, when good principles fail, some mercenary, worldly considerations have a strong influence. Thus one evil passion keeps down another; and no persons, perhaps, feel themselves at liberty to do all that is in their hearts. Were it otherwise, the utmost confusion would prevail, and, such is our hatred of true religion, the Church itself would be soon extirpated. How wonderful is the government, which is maintained over the human race!

After some time, however, an occasion offered, for the accomplishment of Herodias's wish. In an hour of temptation she carried her point: the compliant king was induced to give up his objections. At a splendid banquet, prepared for the celebration of his birthday, when the daughter of his queen had danced before him and his nobles with great applause, he declared with an oath, that he would grant her some mark of his favour, whatever she would ask, though it were the half of his dominion*. This was an instance of extreme rashness, and produced

* Matt. xiv. 6—11. Mar. vi. 21—28.

the most terrible effects. Alas! what can we expect from entertainments, which are calculated to inflame and gratify the passions? The young woman was persuaded by her mother to claim the head of John the Baptist, who had excited her resentment. How strange the proposal! But a vindictive mind will give up every consideration, for the sake of wreaking its vengeance on an enemy.

Herod himself appeared to be struck with horror at the thought of perpetrating the atrocious deed, and yet had not firmness enough to resist. However his conscience might remonstrate, he determined not to exasperate Herodias by a refusal, and argued absurdly, that, unless he complied, he would be despised by his nobility for weakness and inconstancy. He consented, therefore, to the request, though with visible reluctance, and instantly commanded the head of the Lord's prophet to be severed from the body and introduced into the company, as an object, probably, of their profane sport and contemptuous ridicule. Yet, if we make a right estimate of things, we shall be disposed to envy the condition of the Baptist, expiring by the hand of violence, rather than that of Herod, exalted upon a throne of iniquity.

It should seem, the king pretended a regard to veracity in this base transaction: he was unwilling to violate his oath. What vile dissimulation was this! To avoid the charge of perjury, he committed a murder of peculiar enormity. No declarations, however confirmed by an oath, could have bound him to act in direct opposition to the clearest commands
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of God. It was his indispensable duty to depart from the promise, and repent of the rashness, from which it proceeded. Probably, the pretext was false. He perpetrated the crime, not to satisfy his conscience, but to preserve his credit among the courtiers, to silence the importunate clamours of his queen, and perhaps with a view of procuring ease to himself, by removing so troublesome a reproof.

Here we remark the ruinous tendency and progress of sin. The gratification of lust issued in murder; and, we fear, it is no uncommon event. When men abandon themselves to the indulgence of their sensual desires, no bounds will be sufficient to restrain them. They may be hurried from one base action to another, and be determined to persevere, even while they themselves recoil at every step they take. Let us beware of yielding to those solicitations, which will be encouraged by our compliance to increase their demands upon us, and may produce the most tremendous consequences. We may be exasperated by the rebukes of a faithful monitor, and induced to adopt some violent measures against him. But, though we should succeed in that point, still we may not be able to sin without restraint: we may carry about with us an inward tormentor, and, like Pashur, become a terror to ourselves*.

Herod was freed from John's reproofs, and persisted in his iniquity; but he could not forget that innocent blood had been shed, and under that conviction was rendered miserable. Some time after-

* Jer. xx. 3. 4.

ward, having heard remarkable accounts of Jesus, he was filled with perplexing fears, lest this should be the very person now restored to life, whom he had beheaded. Did the oppressor expect the retaliation of his cruelty; the murderer, the approach of an avenger? It should seem, the remembrance of the Baptist haunted him as a continual accuser. How powerful is the voice of conscience? Amidst all the pomps of a palace, it will speak, and make the king upon his throne tremble. The mind of Herod could not be quieted by all the blandishments of his amorous queen, nor by his own libertine principles. He is generally supposed to have embraced the Sadducean notion of the soul's mortality, and to have disbelieved a resurrection. But, in the present case, he could not act the infidel: recollecting the violence he had committed, he was troubled by the apprehension of John's returning to life. Let us learn to reverence that monitor, which we feel within us; for, if we attend not to its dictates in due season, it may prove a severe tormentor.

The uneasiness of Herod had no good effect. As he afterwards threatened to destroy Jesus, it is obvious, that he remained an "enemy of all righteousness." Our Lord despised his menaces, and, in reply calling him a Fox, has justified the conclusion, that the king possessed the subtle and voracious disposition of that wild and detested animal*. It was the same Herod, before whom the Saviour stood arraigned as a criminal, just before his crucifixion†. He was glad of the opportunity to examine so remarkable a prisoner; but his

* Luke xiii. 31, 32.

† Luke xxiii. 7—12.

motive was no better than a curious desire of seeing some miracle performed by this worker of wonders. He proposed a variety of questions, to which Jesus returned no answer. Our Lord well knew his character, what opportunities of information he had neglected, what convictions he had resisted, and therefore refused to afford him any further instructions. This circumstance conveys a solemn admonition. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation*." The gracious offers, which are yet made, if contemptuously rejected, may never be repeated.

Unhappy Herod! Had he been properly affected, even then, with a sense of his condition; had he possessed an honest, humble, teachable disposition, that interview with the Saviour would have been a blessing indeed. But, as the case stood, it tended only to aggravate his guilt and condemnation. He treated the Lord Christ with insolent contempt, as if his pretensions to royalty were absurd in the extreme. He "set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate." Those two unrighteous governors, who had been at variance, were reconciled on that occasion, and then, probably, joined their counsels together, in opposition to the Redeemer. It is not uncommon for sinners, who are incensed against each other, to lay aside their private quarrels and party distinctions, that they may unite with greater force against the Gospel. O Lord, "Of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod

* 2 Cor. vi. 2.

and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together *.”

At last the judgment of God overtook this proud offender. He suffered such a total defeat in battle from Aretas, king of Arabia, whose daughter he had married and divorced, that the Jews themselves considered it as the effect of divine vengeance upon him, for the murder of John the Baptist †. He was afterwards driven from his high station with disgrace, and both he and his adulterous queen died in exile at Lyons in Gaul.

Such was Herod: but now, turning our attention to ourselves, let us enquire, What is our own character? Will any persons undertake to justify the licentious conduct, which is here exhibited? Sinners, do you not perceive the ruinous tendency of your evil passions? What fruit have you received, or are you likely to receive? Is not the faithful servant of Christ, under all his contempt and persecution, more truly honourable and happy than the king of Galilee? And if we look beyond the present scene, how tremendous a prospect opens upon all those, “that know not God, and that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ ‡!” O “repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin §!” “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world ||.” “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life †”

* Acts iv. 27. † Josephus. ‡ 2 Thess. i. 8. § Ezek. xviii. 30. || John i. 29. † iii. 16.

S A I N T S T E P H E N .

C H A P : V I I I .

Stephen, chosen a deacon—his faith and zeal—confounded certain disputants—arraigned before the Sanhedrim—shone with a miraculous lustre—entered on his defence—incensed the council—saw heaven opened—commended his soul to Jesus—prayed for his murderers—died—was buried and lamented.

IN different ages the Church of Christ has struggled with extreme violence of opposition. This has tended to exhibit the enmity of the human heart against true religion; but it has, also, given occasion to the brightest displays of the power, love, and faithfulness of God in administering support and comfort to his suffering people. In the mean time, the Gospel has received abundant confirmation, while many have cheerfully endured contempt and tortures, and laid down their lives in its defence. May every reader be encouraged “to follow the Lamb” through severest difficulties, and learn from the present example to exercise prudence and meekness, as well as zeal and courage, in his service!

We are now called to contemplate the character of one, who imbibed much of the Saviour’s spirit,
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trod in his steps with singular firmness, and, after eminent usefulness, obtained, before any others in the Christian Church, the honourable crown of martyrdom. Amongst that illustrious company, who have fought and bled in a glorious manner, for the testimony of Jesus, none shines with greater splendour than Saint Stephen. In his dying behaviour, especially, we perceive a rich assemblage of graces, which we should keep in view for our own imitation.

He is introduced to our notice, as one of the seven first deacons at Jerusalem. That the Apostles might be relieved from the care of the poor, and give themselves entirely to the spiritual duties of their function, proper persons were chosen for the regular and impartial distribution of the public money; though, it is presumed, their attention was not confined merely to temporal concerns*. None, doubtless, were invested with this office, but such as were of known integrity, piety, and discretion. The direction of the Apostles was, "Look ye out from among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business." Of this description was Saint Stephen. He stands the foremost in the list, and, probably, surpassed the rest in his gifts and attainments. "They chose Stephen, a man full of faith, and of the Holy Ghost."

O how desirable it is, that all the departments in the Church were occupied by persons of similar en-

* Acts vi. 1, &c.

dowments! Those, who are not previously possessed of spiritual knowledge and experience, in private life, are not likely to discharge any public trust with credit and advantage. Preferment generally proves a snare and a curse to those, who do not sincerely devote themselves to the service of God, and exert their abilities, whatever they may be, for his glory: and such cases stamp reproach and infamy on our holy profession. Let us pray, that God would raise up among us faithful witnesses for his truth, and open the way for their admission to those sacred functions, for which he is pleased to qualify them by his Spirit. Thus we may hope, that his work will be revived, and the general languor, which we now lament, succeeded by real fervour of devotion.

At the period, to which we here refer, we contemplate the Church in a prosperous state. Its ministers were all diligent and vigorous, and the conduct of its various members consistent and honourable. Accordingly, as we might expect, "the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly." Their external circumstances, also, were favourable. Gamaliel's advice had stopped the rage of persecution for a season. But the amazing propagation of the faith, through the zealous exertions of some principal characters, again excited a furious opposition. Such a man as St. Stephen, so laborious and useful in the service, could not long remain unnoticed by the adversaries: and at him especially, as one standing in the front of the battle, their envenomed darts were levelled.

“Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.” Having felt in himself the blessedness of the Gospel, he could the more earnestly recommend it to others. He preached with peculiar fervour, and confirmed his doctrines by the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, which he possessed. Attempts were, therefore, made to confound and silence this zealous advocate for Christ.

Certain persons, probably of distinguished abilities and learning, from the different synagogues in Jerusalem, attempted to oppose him by argument: and he was not backward to declare and maintain the truth before these subtle disputants. In this contest he gained, through divine assistance, a decided victory. He spoke by a wisdom superior to his own, which astonished and irresistibly overpowered his antagonists. They were baffled, and, though not driven from the field, obliged to change their mode of attack. When reasoning failed, they tried the effect of slanderous and malicious invectives. Men, in general, are disposed to misrepresent and revile, what they have in vain endeavoured to confute. Accusations were sought for, and perfidious wretches hired to assert a base calumny. The minds of the people were inflamed, and even the principal persons of the city engaged in the opposition. Stephen was apprehended, and with rage and violence dragged before the grand council of the Sanhedrim. A shew of justice was preserved: the prisoner was put upon his trial, and witnesses called, who declared, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.”

In support of their accusation it was alleged, that Stephen had predicted the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and a change of the Mosaic law, through the interposition of that Jesus, whom he preached.

The charge was false: probably, he had not spoken all that was asserted, and the prediction itself, in its utmost extent, was far removed from blasphemy or profaneness. He might have used certain expressions concerning the vengeance, which the Lord would execute upon them for their unbelief: and these they maliciously misconstrued and perverted, adding somewhat of their own, and inferring from them more than could justly be concluded. In the same way, the characters of religious persons more frequently suffer by oblique insinuations, unfair deductions, and wrong interpretations, than by direct lies. We need not be surprised, if, in our defence of the truth, our words be wilfully mistaken, and "our good be evil spoken of." We owe it to the over-ruling influence of God's providence, wonderfully restraining the malevolence of his enemies, that we are at any time preserved from the poisonous attacks of false tongues. If we consider, how soon our reputation, substance, liberty, or life itself might be taken away, only by "setting up false witnesses," as in the case of Stephen, we shall see abundant reason to admire and praise the power and wisdom of God, by which he keeps the world in awe.

The prisoner stood at the bar, and, the charge being brought, the eyes of the court were fixed upon him. And what did they behold? Were there any signs of guilt, any terror, or confusion discoverable

in his countenance? No: they saw him, not only composed and undaunted, but filled with lively joy, and shining with a radiant brightness, like the lustre which appeared in the face of Moses, when he came down from the mount of God. This was more than the natural effect of a good conscience, of a pure zeal for God, or an assurance of his love; though these will afford support and comfort in extreme dangers. Here a miraculous, a divine splendour was diffused, which was a singular honour conferred upon St. Stephen, and which his enemies ought to have acknowledged as an evident token, that God was with him. They "saw his face, as it had been the face of an Angel," majestic and glorious. Were they not, then, so struck with the phenomenon, as to desist from the prosecution, "lest they should be found even to fight against God?" Alas! such is the blindness and obduracy of the human heart, that no external evidence will, of itself, produce any proper, religious convictions: not the vision of an Angel from heaven; nor the testimony of a miserable spirit, if released from its confinement in hell*.

Accordingly the court, disregarding this uncommon appearance, proceeded in the trial, and the high priest, as president of the council, put the prisoner upon his defence †. Then Stephen spake in his own vindication. Yet perhaps, upon viewing the strain of the holy advocate, we may view him as an orator, who brought rather than repelled an accusation. More solicitous to save his audience, than procure his discharge,

* Luke xvi. 31.

† Acts vii. 1, &c.

he solemnly warned them not to reject the gracious proposal of God by his faithful servants, as many of their forefathers had done. We cannot here enlarge upon the different parts of this animated address, which bears the clearest marks of profound wisdom. He endeavoured to fix their attention by giving a short detail of their history; and, while he shewed the various dispensations of mercy to their nation, the tendency of his discourse was to deliver them from a blind attachment to their external privileges, their boasted forms and ceremonies. He observed, that the Lord had called and blessed their ancestors, before their law was published, or their temple built. Yet he expressed himself in such terms both of their ritual and place of worship, as evinced his high veneration for them, and refused the charge of blasphemy, for which he had been arraigned. He proved, that the base spirit of opposition to God and his plans, which they then discovered, had appeared at different times among their progenitors, and intimated their danger of incurring a tremendous condemnation.

The sermon is not to be considered as complete: it is only a part of what he seems to have intended, if they would have given him a patient hearing. But, probably, as he opened his design, they began to shew marks of violent commotion, so that he might perceive, from their countenances, a purpose of interrupting his discourse. He endeavoured, therefore, to draw towards a conclusion, by making a warm and pointed application to his audience. He boldly charged them with imitating the perverseness

nels of the ancient Israelites, obstinately resisting the Holy Ghost, murdering the very Saviour, whom their own prophets had foretold, and contemptuously violating that law, of which they boasted. This was more than they could bear: "they were cut to the heart," not with godly sorrow, as the converts on the day of Pentecost*, but with indignation and rage. They could not preserve even an external decorum, through the violence of their resentment; "they gnashed upon him with their teeth," like beasts of prey, ready to tear and devour him.

St. Stephen, then, had nothing to expect, but immediate destruction: yet he remained undaunted. The Lord God conferred upon him a more signal honour, than before. Such abundant consolations were administered to, the poor persecuted saint, as enabled him to be collected in the face of his furious enemies, though he seemed to lie at their mercy. The glories of the heavenly world were unfolded to his view, and he experienced within his enraptured soul a large measure of its blessedness. What a striking contrast is here exhibited between Him and his adversaries! THEY felt diabolical tempers, which constitute a part of infernal misery: HE, possessing peace and joy unspeakable, exulted, as if he had been translated into the immediate presence of God. Under the full influence of the Holy Ghost, he disregarded their rage, and looked up with fixed attention, as if he were appealing to the righteous Judge of all. He saw the splendour, which encircles the throne of God, and

* Acts ii. 37.

the Saviour himself standing at the right hand of the divine Majesty, engaged for his defence, and waiting to receive him.

The man of God, fired with a holy transport, and not attending to his own situation, declared the delightful vision. The believer, when favoured with heavenly consolations, may frequently be unable to conceal his emotions, and, without consulting the dictates of worldly prudence, may call upon others to admire the greatness of his joy. But it is not probable, that sinners will credit such accounts, as accord not with their own experience. Thus the persecutors of St. Stephen, so far from being convinced by his relation of the wondrous fact, were the more incensed. Confirmed in their former opinion, they concluded that he was a blasphemer, who ought not to be permitted to live. The council broke up in the utmost confusion: they stopped their ears, that they might not be shocked by his profaneness, rushed upon him with furious rage, and hurried him out of the city, that they might destroy him by stoning.

It is remarked, that among those, who encouraged this violent outrage, was a young man named Saul, who soon afterwards became a principal pillar of the Church, and preached the faith, which he then hated and opposed. He gave consent to Stephen's death, and, in testimony of approbation, took in charge the garments of those, who shed his blood. Do we not lament their blind and intemperate zeal? They supposed, that they were doing God service*, and pre-

* John xvi. 2.

tended a regard to his law. But, alas! they knew not, what were their real principles. O Lord, deliver us from such grievous delusion; and, while we profess to contend for thy truth and glory, suffer us not to be carried away by the tempers of Satan!

We turn our eyes from the madness of the murderers, to contemplate the conduct of the dying saint. With unshaken courage, with sweet composure, with lively faith, and fervent love, he closed his valuable life, and left a bright pattern for the admiration of the Church in every succeeding age. While they hurled upon him the instruments of destruction, he looked up in prayer, and commended his soul into the hands of the Saviour, whom he beheld in glory. "Knowing, in whom he had believed, and being persuaded that he was able to keep that which he committed unto him against that day*," he exclaimed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

We remark, to whom his solemn petition was addressed, and we are at no loss to collect his opinion of the divine nature of Christ. He considered him, evidently, as possessed of power to preserve the sacred deposit, then intrusted to him, and as "the true God," who demands supreme reverence and worship. Shall any presume to insinuate, that this eminent saint, "being full of the Holy Ghost," could die in the commission of idolatry? But this horrible position must be maintained, if it be not allowed, that Jesus Christ is God, equal with the Father. It is observable, that Stephen here paid the same adoration to the Redeemer,

* 2 Tim. i. 12.

in delivering up to him the care of his departing soul, which the Redeemer himself offered to the Father, when he said, " Into thy hands I commend my spirit *."

Amidst volleys of stones, which were cast upon his bruised body, Stephen continued unshaken in his mind. Confident of his own security, he felt the tenderest compassion for the persons, who were bringing upon themselves the guilt of innocent blood, and prayed aloud upon his bended knees, that their heinous offence might not rise up in judgment to their condemnation. He cried, " Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." How amiable the temper here manifested! What an illustrious display of the power of divine grace! What a striking resemblance between the dying conduct of this holy martyr, and that of the blessed Redeemer, who, likewise, in his last moments, thus interceded for his murderers, " Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do †!"

The whole of St. Stephen's deportment proved, that he was superior to all the menaces and cruelties of his enemies. When he had offered up his devout supplications for them, " he fell asleep:" he met his dissolution with as much composure, as if he were retiring from the fatigues of the day, and seeking rest and refreshment in sleep for his weary body. Such is the close of life to the believer in Jesus. Surely, we are constrained to say, " Blessed are the dead, which die in the Lord, from henceforth. Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works

* Luke xxiii. 46.

† xxiii. 34.

do follow them*.”—“ Them, also, which sleep in Jesus, will God bring with him†.”

The departure of this illustrious saint, so glorious and happy to himself, appeared a heavy loss to the Church, especially in such a season of violent persecution. As a testimony of the high estimation, in which he was held, “ devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him‡.” It is not wrong to desire, that useful lives may be spared, or, when they are taken away, to grieve for the many inconveniencies, which we may sustain, and the obstruction, which may be apprehended, to the work of God. But is it thus, that the enemies of true religion die? Their removal is, frequently, an acknowledged blessing to society. “ The wicked is driven away in his wickedness:” and, “ when the wicked perish, there is shouting§.”

A serious review of this singular narration will suggest various instructions.

1. It will confirm us in the belief of the Gospel. Among other evidences in support of our holy faith, we may produce the sufferings of its primitive teachers, as furnishing a very strong argument. They, surely, who had the best opportunities of examining, were persuaded of its truth and excellency, since they cheerfully endured the severest tortures in its defence. Stephen was the first, who died in the cause; but many others soon followed his example. Could they be actuated by interested views? Did they conduct

* Rev. xiv. 13.

† 1 Thess. iv. 14.

‡ Acts viii. 1, 2.

§ Prov. xiv. 32. xi. 10.

themselves like impostors? The holy martyr, whom we here contemplate, plainly found in his last moments the reality and blessedness of that religion, which he so powerfully maintained. By the peaceful and triumphant manner of his death, in such circumstances of bodily pain, he has left an unquestionable proof, that our Redeemer is mighty. Many private Christians, likewise, at the hour of their departure, though they suffer not by the hand of violence, yet put it beyond a doubt, by their heavenly tempers and lively joys, that their system is not a "cunningly devised fable," or their faith a vain delusion. O let us listen to their testimony, and be animated by their example! May our last end be like their's; and, when we are closing our eyes upon every thing below, may we be able to say, "I know that my Redeemer liveth!"

2. It will teach us how to meet the fiercest opposition for the truth's sake. Our observations on this head may be thought ill-suited to the present state of things. We grant, that the same violence of persecution, which occurred in former times, does not now prevail. We allow the candour of the age; we are thankful for the mild and equitable laws, which prevent or punish any outrage upon our persons. But there is still "the strife of tongues," the "trial of cruel mockings," which cannot be restrained: and these have considerable influence in deterring men from a zealous profession of religion. Though we are not called to martyrdom, it must be felt as extremely painful to be despised and calumniated by those, whose friendship we are anxious to preserve.

We

We learn, however, from Stephen's example, to resist our enemies with prudence and courage. If, like him, we would "put to silence the ignorance of foolish men," we should be able to give a consistent account of our faith, and defend our principles. Much wisdom, also, will be requisite, in order to adapt our discourse to the circumstances, in which we may be placed. Yet let us beware of cowardice, and, while we behold Stephen's intrepidity, determine never to desert the cause of truth, for the sake of conciliating the esteem of its opposers. What have we to fear, if we serve the Lord Christ?

The present history teaches us, likewise, to unite with an immovable firmness the exercise of meekness and love. Stephen complained not of the injurious treatment, which he received. Instead of throwing out bitter invectives, he testified his readiness to pardon, by commending his murderers to the mercy and forgiveness of God. By such a singular display of forbearance and kindness, he brought more credit to the Gospel, than he could have done by any other arguments. Have we learnt to suffer with a similar disposition? Ah! how much do we dishonour the cause of Christ by the peevishness of our spirit, and the keenness of our resentment against those, who reproach or insult us! Or rather, do we not prove, that we have not yet understood the extent of that holiness, which our religion requires?

3. It encourages us to expect sufficient strength and comfort, under all our persecutions for righteousness' sake. This primitive martyr stands as a witness for

the grace and faithfulness of his divine Master, who will never abandon or deceive his upright servants. That ancient promise is verified in the case of every sincere believer: "As thy days, so shall thy strength be*." And will not this suffice us? If the world frown, yet Jesus will smile: if they curse, He will command a blessing. Whatever may be taken from us for our attachment to him, He will make us abundant compensation. Though the most numerous and powerful adversaries declare against us, we may exult in dependence on his veracity, and say, "The Lord is on my side, I will not fear †."

We need not, we ought not, to stagger at the most terrible appearances of death. We perceive in St. Stephen's countenance, how Jesus can lighten the dark valley, and, even in that tremendous passage, fill our souls with peace and joy. Why should we not hope to maintain such a holy confidence? This, at least, the grace of our God can bestow. Indeed, without a vision, we are sure of what is beyond the present scene: the veil of the heavens is even rent to us, and we contemplate the Saviour, waiting to receive us to mansions of eternal blessedness. Let us persevere in faith and patience, and soon shall the portals be thrown wide open for our honourable admission. "If we suffer, we shall also reign with him ‡." For thus he addresses every Christian soldier, enlisted under his banner, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life §."

* Deut. xxxiii. 25.

† Psal. cxviii. 6.

‡ 2 Tim. ii. 12.

§ Rev. ii. 10.

We pray, therefore, with our church ;

“ Grant, O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon earth, for the testimony of thy truth, we may steadfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed ; and, being filled with the Holy Ghost, may learn to love and bless our persecutors, by the example of thy first Martyr Saint Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to thee, O blessed Jesus, who standest at the right hand of God to succour all those that suffer for thee, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen *.”

* Collect for St. Stephen's day.

SAINT PAUL.

CHAP. IX.

SECT. I.

Paul, his extraction and education—a bigotted Pharisee—persecuted the Church—suddenly stopped by an appearance of Christ—brought to acknowledge and submit to him—struck blind—recovered his sight—baptized by Ananias—preached Christ—Observations on his conversion.

THE Lord God frequently accomplishes his purposes by such instruments, as are thought weak and contemptible, and thus proves, that his cause is not indebted to any human abilities for support. But, at some times and for special purposes, He is pleased to select persons of admired endowments, whom infidelity would gladly have classed amongst its advocates, and to render them of extensive service to the interests of Christianity. Alas! how often do splendid gifts become a snare and a curse, not to the possessors only, but to society, being employed in defence of erroneous and destructive principles! How different is the case, when they are consecrated to the Lord, and devoted to the use of the sanctuary! Then indeed they appear truly

truly excellent, deserve our highest esteem, and contribute to the temporal and eternal happiness of men.

Such reflections arise from the consideration of the character now before us. St. Paul was furnished with large intellectual powers, and ample attainments in literature, which would have done credit to any cause. But it is our province to contemplate the Christian, rather than the Scholar, and to admire, not so much his natural genius and abilities, as “the exceeding grace of God in him.” That grace stamped a dignity and worth on all his qualifications, and gave them their proper direction and employment. Let us hear his own grateful acknowledgment; “By the grace of God I am what I am*.” None ever shone with greater lustre than he did, after he had once entered on the service of Christ: none seem to have arrived at a higher degree of perfection, or to have been honoured with more extensive usefulness in the world. We thank God for the amazing effects of his preaching, and especially for his inspired compositions, which constitute a considerable part of the New Testament, and which will descend as an inestimable blessing to ages yet unborn. May we all partake of the same spirit, and learn from his example and exhortations to yield ourselves to the Saviour with the warmest affections and with unre-served obedience!

Saul, for such was his name originally, was born at Tarsus in Cilicia, and, through peculiar favour granted to the natives of that place, entitled to the freedom and privileges of a Roman citizen†. He sprang from

* 1 Cor. xv. 10.

† Acts xxii. 3, 28.

Jewish parents, and boasted that he could trace his descent from Abraham, and had conformed to all ritual injunctions; "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews *." He was taught the common business of a tent-maker†; but we cannot on that account conclude, that he was confined to any servile labour, or placed in a mean situation‡. He enjoyed the advantages of a liberal education; being well instructed in the learning of the times, and furnished with a considerable share of reading in the Greek and Latin writers.

Probably at an early age, he went to Jerusalem, to acquire the necessary acquaintance with Jewish literature, with the principles of his own religion, and the most generally received interpretations of the Old Testament. For those purposes he was placed under the celebrated Doctor, Gamaliel, and, as his pupil, "brought up at his feet." There he made considerable proficiency in his studies, and soon discovered a zealous attachment to all the Mosaic institutions. Such an attachment might be greatly increased by the influence of his tutor: at least, he came out from under his care a rigid, bigotted Pharisee. He laid an undue stress on the observance of Jewish ceremonies; and, as he could not bear to hear of their abolition or insuffi-

* 2 Cor. xi. 22. Phil. iii. 5. † Acts xviii. 3.

‡ It was customary with the Jews, even the most opulent, to train up their children to the knowledge of some trade, by which they might be able to earn their support in life, if they should be reduced to difficulties.

ciency, he imbibed, with his first rudiments, a spirit of opposition to the Gospel. He thought, and it seemed to be a firm and well-grounded conviction, that it was his bounden duty to exert himself against the Christian faith; "that he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth*."

He acted, as would generally be allowed, sincerely, and according to the dictates of his conscience, while he persecuted, and wished, if possible, to extirpate, the professors of this new religion. But the plea of sincerity and conscience will not excuse him. It was his sin, as it is the sin of many, not to be better informed: a blamable and corrupt temper of mind prevented him from giving the Gospel a serious attention and fair examination. He must have had many opportunities of being acquainted with its evidence, during his residence at Jerusalem; but he was not disposed to see the truth of a system, which totally subverted his proud principles; he obstinately refused to admit the light, which was offered. Hence he became "a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious†;" presumptuously uttering profane speeches against the Lord Christ, setting himself in opposition to all, who called upon his name, and treating them with every species of violence. He concluded, that he was doing God service; a sentiment, that betrayed an extreme blindness and depravity ‡.

A. D. The sacred history first introduces his name
34 upon the death of St. Stephen. When that holy

* Acts xvi. 5, 9. Gal. i. 14.

† 1 Tim. i. 13.

‡ John xvi. 2, 3.

martyr was stoned, Saul, who had probably been present at Stephen's solemn sermon, gave his approbation and assistance to the perpetration of the horrid murder*. He proceeded much farther. With a furious and voracious disposition, like a beast of prey, he pursued the disciples of Christ, that he might tear and devour them. He went great lengths indeed, before it pleased God to stop his mad career. "He made havock of the Church, entering into every house, and haling men and women," paying no deference to sex or age, "committed them to prison †," He confesses, that he "imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed ‡;" that he "punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme, and, being exceedingly mad against them, persecuted them even unto strange cities §." It is obvious that he sought nothing less than their total extirpation. "He breathed out threatenings and slaughter ||;" as if, with every breath he drew, he denounced vengeance and destruction to the poor saints. He applied for the influence and authority of the high priest, who probably was not backward to countenance and promote his plans, that he might carry his persecution even to the distant city of Damascus. And on this expedition he set out, in company with others, who were commissioned to assist him in his purposes, or whom similar fury and malice prompted to attend him.

After such an account, can any doubt be entertained of the real state of his mind at that time?

* Acts vii. 58. viii. 1. xxii. 20.
§ xxvi. 11.

† viii. 3.
|| ix. 1, 2.

‡ xxii. 19.

Whatever

Whatever may be said of his integrity or good intentions, is it not evident from this description, that he was then "in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity?" Shall we not allow his own confession, that he was "the chief of sinners," "not meet to be called an Apostle, because he persecuted the Church of God*?" The principles, by which he was actuated, and the conduct he pursued, were highly offensive to God; so that we cannot but consider him, in that period of his life, as obnoxious to the divine indignation. We grant that he preserved a strict regularity of manners, that his deportment was moral, in the common acceptance of morality, and even blameless before men. He was, also, constant and exact in all the offices of external devotion: but his religion was the offspring of pride and ignorance. He "went about to establish his own righteousness," and maintained a confident assurance of his safety. Alas! he "was alive without the law†:" he understood not the extensive and spiritual demands of God's precepts, or the tremendous consequence of the least deviation from duty. He was therefore elated with a conceit of his goodness; though, at the very time, his obedience was not only partial, but wrong throughout. With all his fair appearances and high pretensions, he "was in the flesh, and the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in his members to bring forth fruit unto death‡."

Some have supposed, that, on account of his sincerity, he possessed a previous disposition to receive

* 1 Tim. i. 15. 1 Cor. xv. 9. † Rom. vii. 9. ‡ Rom. vii. 5, the

the Gospel. But men of such a Pharisaical spirit, as he shewed, are the most unwilling to “submit unto the righteousness of God.” Others have represented his state and character in so favourable a light, that no considerable change could be necessary; nay, that he deserved the grace, which was afterwards bestowed, as a reward for his integrity. • How contrary to this were his own sentiments! In all his writings, he describes his guilt as extremely heinous and aggravated, and speaks with astonishment of the mercy of God, from which he seemed to be farther removed than any other sinner: he is always ready to produce his own case as the most extraordinary instance of forgiveness, extended to an atrocious offender.

Yet we allow, that his ignorance, though it forms not an excuse, is in some sense, a palliation*. Had he proceeded the same lengths in opposing Christ, against clear information and strong convictions, we apprehend, that he would have been given up to a judicial hardness, beyond the possibility of pardon. Let none flatter themselves, that the want of instruction will be a sufficient security. The most awful denunciations are levelled against those, who know not God and his truth†. You may be confident of your own rectitude, and yet be grievously deceived. Even a misguided conscience may prove destructive. Though you abstain from gross immoralities, and be admired for your punctual attention to religious duties, your prevailing tempers may be such, as to render you odious to God. Come, and learn from the example

* 1 Tim. i. 13.

† 1 Cor. xv. 34. 2 Thess. i. 8.

before us the necessity of a total renovation. There is an universal depravity of nature, which requires to be subdued. You must “put off the old man, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind*†” and till this be effected, your pretended obedience, is detestable, as proceeding from corrupt motives.

A. D. Such a change took place in Saul, when he was³⁵ about the age of twenty-four years, as is generally supposed, and within two or three after the death of Christ. Young as he was, he had given full proof of a decided and bitter opposition to the Gospel. He had, indeed, been “separated from his mother’s womb†,” in the counsels of God: but the call was long deferred, that the riches of divine grace might be more gloriously exhibited. We are now to behold the Lord Jesus, who had shewn all long-suffering, taking to himself his great power, in an instant subduing the fierce enmity of the rebel, and attaching him by the strongest ties of affection to his own person and service.

Saul had come into the neighbourhood of Damascus, with murderous rage against all the disciples of Jesus, and, possibly, was anticipating the pleasure he should receive in binding and torturing them‡. He was within view of the city, when suddenly the appearance of an uncommon brightness and glory shining from heaven, which far exceeded the splendour of the sun, checked his progress. This occurred at mid-day, which rendered the phenomenon the more

* Eph. iv. 22, 23. † Gal. i. 15. ‡ Acts ix. 3—22.
xxii. 6—16. xxvi. 12—20.

singular. Both Saul and his companions were instantly struck to the ground, dazzled and confounded. The voice of insulted majesty reproved him with peculiar solemnity, and thus called him to account for his injurious conduct; "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?"

It should seem, that not only was this remarkable address distinctly heard, but some august personage was exhibited to his view. Saul enquired, "Who art thou, Lord?" Probably, Christ manifested himself in human form, encircled with that lustre, which he possesses in his present exaltation, while the answer was returned, "I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." As if he had said, "I, who appear before thee with such marks of elevated dignity, am no other than the despised Nazarene, against whom thy rage is ultimately directed. I consider the insults and oppression, which my faithful people suffer, as offered to myself. But thy furious attempts, in the final event, cannot hurt me or my cause: thou art only wounding thyself. Cease, then, from thy foolish and wicked opposition."

Wonderful indeed was the condescension of the Lord, in arguing with one so full of enmity! It was amazing forbearance and compassion, that he did not "make bare his holy arm," destroy the persecutor, and leave him a monument of righteous vengeance. But he spoke in mercy, and yet spoke effectually. Saul instantly submitted with unfeigned contrition, and presumed not to allege any thing in his own defence. A sudden conviction of his enormous guilt,

guilt, and a sight of the glory of the Redeemer, whom he had so daringly provoked, almost overwhelmed him with fear and astonishment. Perhaps doubting whether there could be any hope for him, yet resolved to try the effect of an humble application, he cried out, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Thus resigning himself into the hands of Jesus, he obtained forgiveness. He was directed to go into the city for further instruction, and encouraged by an assurance, that he should be appointed a minister of the Gospel with a divine commission, under the immediate protection of Heaven. It was declared, that he should be the favoured Instrument of carrying the glad tidings of salvation to Heathen lands, and extending to many souls the various blessings of the redemption, that is in Christ Jesus.

The vision being ended, Saul arose; but the stupendous lustre, which had shone upon him, deprived him of sight. His eyes were closed in darkness; an emblem of the former blindness of his soul. Unable, therefore, to guide himself, he was conducted to Damascus, where he continued, probably in extreme confusion and distress, for three days without beholding any object or receiving any food. That season he employed in serious recollection and fervent prayer, humbly waiting for further deliverance. The Lord graciously remarked the change, and said of him, "Behold, he prayeth!" He had, even from his youth, repeated forms of devotion; but never before that period had his heart been raised to heaven with earnest supplication. It pleases God, in general, to afford
young

young converts opportunity for the exercise of penitential sorrow and importunate cries for mercy, before he pours in upon them the clear light and full comforts of the Gospel. This may be a time of heaviness, but it furnishes an useful and necessary preparation of mind; and joy at length, will certainly succeed.

A disciple at Damascus was sent by express revelation to restore to Saul his lost sight, and confirm him in the Christian faith. The coming and design of that messenger had also been intimated to Saul by a previous vision; and this coincidence of circumstances proved more evidently, that the whole transaction was the mighty work of God, and not a delusion or imposture. Ananias was the person commissioned to visit the "chosen vessel;" and by his means Saul was instantly delivered from blindness, filled with the Holy Ghost, furnished with miraculous powers, and admitted by baptism into the Church of Christ.

What a change was this! He, who had intended to harass and torment the disciples, joined himself to them as their friend and brother, and esteemed it the highest honour to become a follower and preacher of Jesus the Nazarene, whose name he had treated with blasphemous contempt. Having received full information both of the facts and doctrines of the Gospel, by direct communications from heaven, he "conferred not with flesh and blood *," consulted not the dictates of worldly prudence or carnal inclinations, but immediately began to declare and maintain, in the

* Gal. 1. 16.

synagogues of Damascus, what he had learnt by revelation, and proved to the astonishment of those, who had known his former character, that Jesus is indeed the promised Saviour. Thus he “preached the faith, which once he destroyed *,” and soon appeared to be “a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master’s use †.” Shall we not “glorify God in him?” “Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who only doeth wondrous things: and blessed be his glorious name for ever ‡.”

The continuance and good effects of this change demonstrate, that it was no fiction, nor the production of terror or of fancy, but a real conversion, accomplished by the immediate interposition of the Lord from heaven. From the moment that Saul was first struck to the ground, what an astonishing difference did he manifest in his whole spirit and conduct! Where is now the fury of the persecutor? and what is become of all his murderous designs against the believers at Damascus? “The wolf dwells with the lamb, and the leopard lies down with the kid,” no longer seeking to “hurt” or “destroy §.” Where is the tongue of the blasphemer, so accustomed to utter profane speeches against Christ? The very mention of Jesus of Nazareth would have provoked his indignation: but no sooner does the Saviour reveal his grace and glory, than the fierce adversary relinquishes all further plans of opposition, is ashamed of his former enmity, and alarmed for his future safety: he

* Gal. i. 23.

† 2 Tim. ii. 21.

‡ Psal. lxxii. 18, 19.

§ Isa. xi. 6—9.

cries for mercy, acknowledges the divine character, and desires to follow the directions, of Jesus. "O Lord, what I know not, teach thou me; guide me into that way, in which I have foolishly refused to walk; rescue my guilty soul from deserved wrath, and shew me what thou requirest to be done. I give myself to thee, and desire to live in cheerful and unre-served obedience to thy precepts." Such is the purport of his devout exclamation, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" This is the language of conversion; and this effect could no more be produced by natural causes, than the sun could be obstructed in its course, or the rivers made to flow backward in their channels, without a miraculous interference.

At the period here referred to, as we apprehend, "the commandment came, sin revived, and he died *." While his mind was deeply impressed with a conviction of the purity and extent of the law, he felt within himself the powerful working of a corrupt nature, and saw that as a transgressor, under condemnation, he was liable to perish. The haughty Pharisee, therefore, was turned into a weeping penitent. "Through the law," he became "dead to the law †;" he gave up all the proud expectations, which he had entertained from his own obedience; and "what things were gain to him, those he counted loss for Christ ‡." The ground of his former dependence failing, he relinquished it, and surrendered himself to Jesus, in whom he then trusted for salvation, and to whose service he devoted the whole of his future life.

* Rom. vii. 9.

† Gal. ii. 19.

‡ Phil. iii. 7.

From

From that moment he continued zealously attached to the cause of Christ, though under the strongest possible temptations to desert it, and laboured more abundantly than any others. Shall we not say with devout affections; "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes *?"

But the benefits were not confined to St. Paul alone. We are not told, how his companions were affected, who, probably, were equally ignorant or equally malevolent with himself. For some time they remained speechless, under an impression of great terror; but we know not, that any of them became true converts. Yet there were others, for whose advantage this singular interposition was evidently designed. Many saw, confessed, and admired, the change: many were convinced of the truth of the Gospel, and turned to the Lord. This new preacher, in his zeal to propagate the faith, travelled from city to city, from one kingdom to another, and thousands, believing his testimony, were added to the Church. No menaces or sufferings from men could deter them from entering on the service of Christ; in whom they found a sufficient compensation, and a never failing source of joy. They "shone as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life," and thus proved that the Apostle "had not run in vain, neither laboured in vain †."

What shall we say to such effects as these? They could not proceed from mere imagination; they demonstrate incontestably, that the Christian system is

* Psal. cxviii. 23.

† Phil. ii. 15, 16.

not a delusion or a cheat. Let the declarations of St. Paul be regarded, as they ought to be, and it must be allowed that our faith is divine. He affirms, that he received it by the inspiration of the Almighty, and not by human teaching *. He preached it with zeal and success, before he had any communication with the other Apostles: and they all perfectly coincided in their account both of facts and doctrines. Now to what shall we ascribe this exact agreement, if not to the influence of Heaven?

Shall Paul be deemed an impostor †? What motive could induce him to change his party, and contrive such a plan of deception? Did he seek for wealth, honour, power, or sensual gratification? No: all these he cheerfully renounced; and, while he patiently endured extreme afflictions, he proved, at least, that he firmly believed the Gospel. But was he not an enthusiast? No: the farthest from it possible. He betrayed no mark of an enthusiast, except his zeal should be represented in that light. We observe, however, that it was not the blind and furious zeal of a bigot or fanatic, but the generous ardour of one who knew the truth, and felt the unspeakable importance, of his commission. Besides, no supposition of enthusiasm can ever account for the success of his labours, which, of itself, evinces that the hand of the Lord was with him.

If it be said, that, though sincere, he might yet be deceived by others; we ask, By whom? By the disci-

* Gal. i. 11, &c.

† See this subject clearly stated in Lyttleton's Observations on the conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul.

ples of Christ? They were hardly persuaded to credit his integrity, and the reality of his conversion; nor could the change originate from them, with whom he had no previous intercourse. And it will not, surely, be alleged, that he was imposed on by his former associates, who sought his life for deserting their cause. The only fair conclusion is, that he was constituted an Apostle by the Lord Jesus, and that the doctrine which he preached is a revelation from heaven. Let us rejoice and give thanks for this interesting event, and pray that "the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ may shine unto us."

We admire the divine perfections as displayed in St. Paul's conversion. We cannot but perceive in it the sovereignty of God, who, without being accountable to us, raises up what instruments he pleases for his own service and glory. Let us dispute as we may, "He will have mercy on whom he will have mercy *." It becomes not us to quarrel with his appointments. "Who art thou, that repliest against God †?" The case before us shews, how feeble is the strongest opposition to Him. What can the most furious persecutors effect? "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision ‡." He can suddenly confound their purposes, strike terror into their hearts, abase and humble them, and even render them zealous advocates for his truth. "There is none like unto thee, O Lord; neither are there any works like unto thy works §!"

The wisdom of God, also, appears wonderful in

* Rom. ix. 15.

† 20.

‡ Psal. ii. 4.

§ lxxxvi. 8.

selecting a person of St. Paul's former character, whom we should have thought most unlikely to be employed in the Church of Christ. On many accounts he must be allowed to be a desirable and unexceptionable witness for the Gospel. Such had been his violent prejudice against it; and, afterwards, such was his patient submission to suffering, so firm the courage, and unwearied the assiduity, which he shewed in its support, that, without considering his strong natural abilities, we admire the suitability of his appointment to the ministry, though he "was before a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious."

In the most signal manner, the rich mercy of our God and the sufficiency of his grace in Jesus Christ are here exhibited. St. Paul represents his own case as so remarkable in this view, that it may furnish encouragement to penitents in every age, whatever their former character may have been. He obtained forgiveness for this very purpose, that none might despair. The Saviour, who rescued him, can recover you, who have departed the farthest from God: he can subdue your depravity, sanctify your polluted heart, and pardon your numerous and aggravated sins, even your fierce opposition to his Gospel, and profane blasphemies against himself. O rejoice in that "faithful saying," which is indeed "worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners *:" and, like the Apostle, "count all things but dung, that you may win Christ, and be found in Him †!"

* 1 Tim. i. 15.

† Phil. iii. 8, 9.

SAINT PAUL.

SECT. 2.

Paul, driven from Damascus and then from Jerusalem, fled to Tarsus—accompanied Barnabas to Antioch in Syria, and thence to Jerusalem—sent forth with him to preach to the Gentiles, travelled through Cyprus—went to Perga, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe—returned to Antioch in Syria—attended the council at Jerusalem—reproved Peter—separated from Barnabas.

RELIGION consists not in a system of merely speculative notions: the sentiments and affections, which it excites in the heart, produce such excellent fruits in the life, as evince its holy nature and divine original. Who will not allow, that this was eminently the case with St. Paul? We have already intimated that the truth of his conversion appeared by its effects: we must now appeal to the whole of his subsequent conduct for the proof of this observation. We shall perceive him, to the last moment, invariably and zealously attached to the cause of Christ, exerting himself not only as a soldier, but as a principal leader and commander, in the armies of the faithful. We cannot but remark with admiration his activity, courage, fervour, and perseverance:

yet at the same time we may propose him as a bright pattern of meekness, patience, contempt of the world, purity, and spirituality of mind. Let it be our pleasing employment, to accompany him from place to place, and contemplate the important purposes, for which he was called and ordained to the Apostolic function.

The lovers of history may here find enough to engage their attention, and excite their wonder. We invite them to study the records of the primitive Church, which abound with facts most curious and interesting, and are particularly entitled to regard, as proceeding from the pen of inspiration. Come, and see the great Apostle, by his indefatigable labours, planting, watering, enlarging, and protecting many Christian societies. Come, and observe the kingdom of Satan shaken and subverted, and upon its ruins the kingdom of peace and righteousness established.

St. Paul began, immediately after his conversion, to declare the revelations he had received, and to preach Christ in the synagogues at Damascus *. There he continued for three years, excepting the time which he spent in Arabia, whither he retired for a season, and where, probably, he was favoured with clearer discoveries of divine truth †. He shewed a particular concern for his unbelieving brethren among the Jews, and endeavoured with unremitting zeal to recommend the Gospel to their acceptance. Did they not credit his testimony? We might have supposed, that such a witness would have removed every objec-

* Acts ix. 20, &c.

† Gal. i. 17.

tion. But alas! through the perverseness of nature, men are disposed to resist every effort for their salvation. Instead of listening to his arguments and exhortations, the Jews conspired against his life, and thus exhibited to his view a picture of what he himself had been. A formidable combination was entered into, and the governor of the city, together with his garrison, was employed to apprehend him. But their scheme failed; for what could all their counsels and preparations avail against the man, whom the Lord of hosts defended? "Through a window in a basket he was let down by the wall, and escaped their hands*."

A. D. Upon that occasion he fled to Jerusalem, and ³⁸ there sought for the society of those very disciples, whom he had once abhorred and persecuted. They, however, remembering his former character, and not having received a satisfactory account of his conversion, were backward to credit his professions; till Barnabas interfered and related the important change, which had taken place. For a few days he had free communications with the Church, but was not indebted to the most eminent of the Apostles for his knowledge of the Gospel †. At Jerusalem he had been known as a violent enemy to the Christian faith; and therefore it might seem, that his testimony in its support would there meet with peculiar regard. Yet it proved otherwise. His zeal for the honour of the Saviour soon excited the indignation of his countrymen; and,

* 2 Cor. xi. 32, 33.

† Gal. i. 18, 19. Perhaps to this period of his history we should refer the trance, which he mentions, Acts xxii. 17.

being again obliged to fly for his life, he was conducted with haste to Tarsus, his native city.

A. D. Here he obtained a safe retreat, and probably⁴² applied himself with diligence to the work of the ministry: but what was his success we are not informed. Nothing further is recorded of him during the three, or four following years. Barnabas, at length, in great want of his assistance, found him at Tarsus, and prevailed on him to go to Antioch, the capital of Syria, where they laboured together for the space of a year with good effect *. Our Apostle, as we may conclude from his repeated visits, felt a peculiar attachment to the large and flourishing Church, which was gathered in that place: and there the disciples of Jesus first received the honourable appellation of CHRISTIANS. The name was once reproachful: we, perhaps, glory in it; but do we seriously consider, according to this profession, what is our relation to the Lord Jesus Christ, and what the ties which bind us to his person, and call for an inflexible attachment to his Gospel? Are we, what the title imports, his followers and servants?

Paul and his intimate companion, Barnabas, were sent from Antioch with certain charitable collections to the poor saints at Jerusalem, who were at that time distressed by famine: and, having faithfully executed their commission, they returned to Antioch, taking with them John Mark as their associate and assistant †.

A. D. At length, those holy men, filled with zeal⁴⁵ for God, went forth to propagate the Christian

* Acts xi. 25, &c.

† Acts xii. 25.

faith upon a more extensive plan. In obedience to an express revelation from God, they were set apart by the solemn prayers of certain teachers in the Church, and a peculiar influence of the Holy Ghost qualified them, for carrying the glad tidings of salvation among the Heathens *. They had previously committed themselves to the Lord; and, in consequence of their engagements with him, considered themselves at his disposal. Without hesitation or reluctance, therefore, they obeyed the call, not declining the most painful services, nor shrinking from formidable dangers. They accounted it sufficient that the Lord was with them, and had assigned them their work. Ah! where shall we now find such an unfeigned regard to God and his cause? Do not "all seek their own, and not the things which are Jesus Christ's †?" •

They went out, like the Patriarch of old, "not knowing whither they went ‡," depending upon their Lord for guidance and protection. The other Apostles, also, were sent forth to evangelize the world; but little is told us concerning their labours. The sacred history of the Church, from this period, is confined chiefly to the exertions and sufferings of St. Paul; and yet it does not relate the whole, or give us even the closing scene of his life.

Paul, therefore, and his beloved Barnabas, set out from Antioch upon their momentous embassy. Having arrived at Cyprus, a large island in the Mediterranean sea, they travelled through it, preaching

* Acts xiii. 1, &c. † Phil. ii. 21. ‡ Heb. xi. 8.

by the way. At Paphos, a principal town, a singular occurrence happened. Sergius Paulus, the deputy or Roman governor of the country, discovered a favourable disposition, and expressed a desire to hear the Gospel. But Elymas, a noted magician in the place, endeavoured to prejudice him against it, probably through a fear of losing his own influence and importance. Immediately, however, at the word of Paul, this vile opposer of the faith, who laboured to keep others in spiritual darkness, was struck blind; and the ruler, convinced by the miracle, embraced the truth. Many circumstances conspire to prevent the free access of the ministers of Christ to persons of high rank. They, whose interest or ascendancy is likely to be subverted by an admission of the Gospel, may always be expected to resist it: and therefore Satan, doubtless, employs his instruments, if possible, to exclude religion from courts and palaces. But our God, who is mighty, can suddenly confound the purposes of his enemies, and render them subservient to his counsels. In due time, through the strong influence of his Spirit, even "kings shall fall down before him," and become "the nursing-fathers" of his Church *.

From Cyprus, Paul and his companions went to Perga in Pamphylia; and there they were deserted by John Mark, who very dishonourably declined the service, and returned to Jerusalem. He did not renounce the faith; but his conduct was highly blamable, and produced bad consequences. Ah! what

* Psa. lxxii. 11. Isa. xlix. 23.

pain do sincere persons feel, on account of such cases! Yet, considering what human nature is, we may expect to suffer, not only through the apostasy of false brethren, but also through the imprudence, sloth, and cowardice of real Christians. We ought to mourn for the discredit brought upon our profession, and yet at the same time remember, that "the foundation of God standeth sure *."

The zealous preachers, whom we are here contemplating, continued their progress. At Antioch in Pisidia, (a different town and far distant from the Antioch before mentioned) they attended the public worship of the Jewish synagogue on the sabbath-day. After the usual service, being permitted to address the people, Paul arose and spake in a most animated manner, declaring and enforcing the grand truths of the Gospel. To impress their minds in favour of his doctrine, he began with explaining some of the divine dispensations towards their ancestors, particularly in promising the Saviour, and gradually preparing them for his reception. He then proceeded to exhibit Jesus as the Christ, who had been predicted. He represented him as despised and rejected by the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and there most injuriously suffering the death of the cross. But he maintained, that the whole of these transactions had occurred agreeably to their own scriptures, and that according to express prophecies, which they themselves acknowledged, Jesus had been raised from the grave, and proved to be the very Saviour, whom they professed to look for. He solemnly entreated them

* 2 Tim. ii. 19.

to consider that full and free redemption, which was proposed to every believer, and warned them, by a tremendous denunciation, not to reject the gracious offer. Let us learn from the Apostle's sermon to be thankful for the clear light of the Gospel, with which we are favoured. "To us is the word of this salvation sent." But, do we truly understand its import? or, do we cordially embrace it? O let us beware, lest we come under the condemnation of the despisers, who shall perish with aggravated ruin!

What was the effect of Paul's address? The generality of the congregation appear not to have been properly impressed: but certain Gentiles, who were present, requested that they might have an opportunity, on the following sabbath, of hearing the same truths enforced. Many of the Jews, also, and proselytes to their religion, after the dismissal of the assembly, accompanied Paul and Barnabas, who in their private exhortations endeavoured to persuade them to persevere in a steadfast attachment to the Gospel. On the subsequent sabbath, the immense crowds of people, who were collected, excited the envious displeasure of the Jews: and accordingly, they began to oppose and blaspheme the doctrine delivered. Not discouraged, however, but rather animated by the violence of these objectors, Paul declared, that, though the first offer of mercy had been tendered to them, yet upon their refusal the invitation would be given to the Gentiles. Many of the latter description rejoiced at the intimation, and, through the rich and sovereign grace of God, embraced the Christian faith,

From

From them, likewise, the truth of God was disseminated throughout all the neighbouring country.

The success was great; but that very circumstance rendered the adversaries more furious; and a formidable host of persecutors conspired together. The result was, that Paul and his beloved associate were forcibly driven from the place. Yet, even under that severe storm, the sincere converts remained unshaken, and experienced a season of peculiar happiness. While their enemies raged and threatened, "the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost."

Surely, that violence is not to be dreaded, how extreme soever it may be, which cannot prevent us from receiving the lively comforts of religion, and which may have a tendency to promote these very comforts in our souls. Let us "be strong, and of a good courage." Let us pray, that we, like the Christians at Antioch, may be favoured with an abundant measure of inward peace and consolation from the divine Spirit; and then we shall not be moved by the vehemence and menaces of opposers. Wherever the Gospel meets with any signal success, it may be expected to produce contentions and separations among those, who were intimately united. It draws forth from many persons that enmity of the heart against real godliness, which had been before concealed, and covered perhaps with the garb of piety. Among the persecutors were "DEVOUT" as well as "honourable women:" and frequently, those, who have made a shew of sanctity, and been admired on that account, are the first

first to raise objections. Many, also; among ourselves, like those of old, are disgusted with the large congregations, which generally attend the zealous preachers of the word of God. They often think and mention it as an upbraiding reproach, that such assemblies consist chiefly of the poor. That, which ought to be matter of rejoicing, excites envy and displeasure. Let those, however, who labour in the Gospel, be content to follow the steps of the Apostles, "by honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true *."

Paul and Barnabas departed from Antioch, and upon quitting the place shook off the dust of their feet, as a testimony against the unbelieving inhabitants, agreeably to the directions of Jesus to his disciples †. Thence they proceeded to Iconium, and there opened their message with remarkable success ‡. In that city they continued for a considerable time, and with great courage declared the truth of God, which He was pleased to confirm by various miracles, and to make effectual to the conversion of many persons. But a furious opposition was raised against them, exactly similar to what they experienced at Antioch. They had numerous friends among the people; but others calumniated their characters and doctrine, and endeavoured to draw the public odium upon them. A party was formed, and a scheme laid, in which the men of chief power were engaged, to harass and by violent death destroy these new preachers. They, however, being apprized of the design,

* 2 Cor. vi. 8.

† Mar. vi. 11.

‡ Acts xiv. 1, &c.

made their escape to Lystra, and both there and throughout the neighbourhood, notwithstanding their past and the prospect of fresh dangers, laboured with unremitting ardour for the propagation of the Gospel.

At Lystra a poor cripple, who had been lame from his birth, received an instantaneous cure by the word of St. Paul. The miracle, being openly performed, excited general attention. But such was the blindness and wretched stupidity of the people, that, instead of desiring to be instructed by these eminent teachers, they began to deify them, and actually prepared for them idolatrous sacrifices. With wild vociferations they cried out, "The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men." Barnabas they called Jupiter, as being of the most stately appearance; and Paul obtained the title of Mercury, because he was the principal speaker.

This circumstance could not but greatly distress them, who sought no vain applause, and wished to direct the regard of all to their Lord and Master. They were struck with horror at the offer of divine honours, and doubtless felt more pain on that account, than for their severest persecutions. They rent their clothes, in abhorrence of the profaneness, ran among the multitude with peculiar eagerness, reproved them for their folly in worshipping men of the same infirmities with themselves, and exhorted them to turn from such senseless practices to the service of the living God, the Creator and Preserver of heaven and earth. This bold and animated address was scarcely sufficient to divert them from their purpose. It

then, that these primitive assertors of the Christian faith were not actuated by selfish views or worldly expectations: they could and did declare, with the greatest sincerity, "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord *." God forbid, that any, who sustain the ministerial office, should aim at their own exaltation, or be pleased with the flattering speeches and admiration of their hearers! They should desire to obtain the approbation of their fellow-creatures no farther, than as it may give them an opportunity of recommending the Saviour. Being chiefly concerned for his glory, they will be grieved, when He is overlooked, and they themselves are extravagantly praised.

Popular favour is a poor acquisition: "it is a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away †." The people at Lystra, who had proposed to worship St. Paul as a deity, being soon afterwards prejudiced by the objections of certain furious persecutors from Antioch and Iconium, rose up with violence against him, and stoned him. They then dragged him out of the city, with marks of extreme contempt, and left him as one dead. Here, therefore, the history of our Apostle was, to all human appearance, concluded. But the Lord God, who designed him for more extensive usefulness in the Church, interposed for his deliverance. He suddenly and miraculously restored him to his former strength, and the Apostle, undismayed by his enemies, returned to the city, and the next day travelled with

* 2 Cor. iv. 5.

† James iv. 14.

Barnabas to Derbe. It were easy for the Lord to rescue his servants from every danger and distress. Let us learn to commit ourselves cheerfully to his disposal, desirous only, whatever events may await us, that "Christ may be magnified in our body, whether it be by life or by death *."

At Derbe they preached with vigour and success, and there finished their progress for that time, advancing no farther into the country. They went back by the same road, and again visited the places, in which they had met with such violent opposition. Trusting in divine Providence, they dreaded no consequences to themselves; and they were solicitous to confirm and comfort those, who had received by their ministry the good word of God. They exhorted the disciples, therefore, throughout that region, to maintain their Christian profession under all their afflictions, and reminded them, that God has appointed his people to pass through many trials in the road to his kingdom. At the several towns, where churches were gathered, they ordained ministers over them for their spiritual guidance, and solemnly commended them all to the care and protection of the Lord Christ. Much regard is due to young converts, and much pains should be used to establish them in their holy calling, that they may not, by any temptations, be moved away from the hope of the Gospel. O be encouraged to persevere through all opposition, and "hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown †!" Be not unwilling to suffer: the cross must be your present portion;

* Phil. i. 20.

† Rev. iii. 11.

it is your duty to bear it cheerfully, in the expectation of receiving "the crown of life."

At length these indefatigable labourers returned to Antioch in Syria, from which place they had first set out on their important expedition. There they fixed their abode for some time, that they might enjoy the society of the faithful, and to them they recounted the various instances of support and success, with which they had been favoured in their ministry among the Gentiles. Shall not we, also, cultivate an intercourse with those, who know and love the Lord? And, when admitted to their friendship, shall we not embrace the opportunity of declaring, or enquiring after, the enlargement of the Church? Hath God "opened the door of faith" to those, who were in darkness? Let this be proclaimed with grateful adoration: for no information can be more interesting or delightful. Compared with this, how trifling and foolish are the subjects, which generally occupy conversation! How grievous is the stupidity of men, who, though eager to hear or relate every idle occurrence, have no desire to be acquainted with the glorious work, which God is carrying on by the Gospel of his Son!

A. D. St. Paul and his companion were now called⁵² to different trials, not to contend with furious adversaries, but to oppose and correct some dangerous mistakes among the brethren. A dissension arose, in consequence of certain Jewish zealots maintaining, that circumcision and the observance of the ceremonial law were absolutely necessary for the salvation

vation of Gentile believers *. Our Apostle considered the sentiment as a destructive error, subverting the very foundation of the Gospel, and set himself to resist it with great firmness. It implied, that the obedience and sacrifice of Christ are not a sufficient ground of dependence towards God, that we cannot be completely justified by faith alone, however sincere, and that our own qualifications or performances have a share, at least, in procuring our favourable acceptance.

We might have thought, that positions, so directly contrary to the fundamental principles of the Christian system, would have gained no credit. But many were staggered; and therefore, from a desire of satisfying their consciences, and restoring the peace of the Church, it was agreed that Paul and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem, and take the opinion of the Apostles and elders upon the subject †. Accordingly, a solemn council was there held, and the matter seriously discussed. A full account of the work of God among the Gentiles was given; and it was decided, that real believers, among the uncircumcised, should not be required to conform to the Mosaic rites, but be considered as complete in Christ Jesus. With this decree the ambassadors returned to Antioch; and their intelligence produced great joy among the dis-

* Acts xv. 1, &c.

† It is supposed, that the Apostle refers to this journey, when he says, that he "went up by revelation." Doubtless, he then acted under the influence of the Spirit, and the consultation was overruled for the clearer understanding and more explicit declaration of the Gospel. Gal. ii. 1—10.

ciples. For that time the dispute was settled; but it broke out afterwards in other places, as appears from several of St. Paul's Epistles, especially from that to the Galatians.

Erroneous doctrines of a like dangerous tendency are propagated in the present day. Circumcision, indeed, is not insisted on; but, as if the merit of the Saviour were not sufficient for our justification, it is maintained that our own obedience must, in part at least, recommend us to God. Satan is ever labouring to divide the Church, and corrupt the minds of its members "from the simplicity that is in Christ *." He is the father of lies, and it is his grand artifice to spread false opinions. It is remarkable, that the unscriptural sentiments, advanced in modern times, made their appearance very early; and were permitted to do so, that they might receive a full confutation from the Apostles themselves. Let us beware of the subtle devices of our adversary, and, in order the more successfully to resist him, let us study the divine oracles, which will furnish us with weapons of defence against all the attacks of error.

During St. Paul's continuance at Antioch, he had occasion to speak in language of sharp reprehension to St. Peter, who visited the place, and withdrew from the Gentile converts through a fear of displeasing the Jews †. Paul stood forth as a bold advocate for the liberty of the Gospel, maintaining that the Gentiles, who were turned to God by faith, were as secure through the grace of the Saviour, as the

* 2 Cor. xi. 3.

† Gal. ii. 11, &c.

Jews themselves. It was a painful task to reprove a beloved brother; but, where the purity of God's truth is likely to suffer, we should make no compliances, nor shew any partialities; we should earnestly contend for the honour of the Gospel, even against our dearest friends. ∴

The Church at Antioch enjoyed the society and the labours of St. Paul for some time. But being eager to extend his usefulness, and confirm the disciples at a distance, he proposed to Barnabas, that they should again visit the people, to whom they had preached, and enquire into their state. The scheme was readily agreed to; and yet it gave occasion to a warm contention, which issued in a separation of these two affectionate companions. We contemplate this circumstance with wonder and grief. But, when we perceive the evident signs of wrong tempers in persons so confessedly eminent, we should learn to place no confidence in the most exalted of human characters, and to keep our own hearts with diligence and care. The cause of the difference appears trifling; but there is nothing, however inconsiderable, which may not excite and draw forth some latent corruption of the mind: nay, probably, we are most liable to fall by the smallest temptations; for these do not awaken our fears, or compel us to stand upon our guard.

Barnabas was attached to his nephew John Mark, and desirous that he should be received again as their associate. Paul stated the impropriety of taking with them such an attendant, as had shamefully

deserted them on a former occasion. Each of the disputants might urge various reasons, and, possibly, both were influenced by right motives. But we pretend not to justify every thing even in the Apostles. They were men, and sometimes openly betrayed that depravity, which they continually lamented in secret. In the present case, we apprehend, the two parties felt a blamable warmth of temper. O let us watch, and, remembering what is in our hearts, always suspect some danger nigh! We are exposed in the company of dearest friends, as well as in that of our most decided enemies.

But we admire the over-ruling providence of God, which in various ways brings good out of evil. This very disagreement became the means of enlarging the Church, and promoting the salvation of many souls. The two preachers went different roads, carried the message of the Gospel to different quarters. Though parted from each other, they still continued to publish it to an ignorant and unbelieving world; and their temporary division became the cause of its more speedy and extensive propagation. It appears, also, that, whatever resentment might be felt at the time, a perfect reconciliation was soon effected. Paul himself afterwards spoke in the highest terms, not only of his beloved Barnabas, but of Mark also, whom he received as his assistant*. Christians may be seduced from the path of duty, but their sincerity will be evinced by their recovery.

The example before us does not afford any just

* 1 Cor. ix. 6. Col. iv. 10. 2 Tim. iv. 11.

encouragement

encouragement to sin; it furnishes the strongest arguments for holiness. Well may we blush and hide our faces in the dust, upon a comparison of ourselves with St. Paul. Do we not perceive in him an excellence of character, of which we are destitute? If it was right for him to labour with such unwearied assiduity, to spend and be spent in the service of Christ, shall we think ourselves at liberty to lead an unprofitable and a sensual life, to take our ease, eat, drink, and be merry? No: we must be conformed to the spirit of the Apostles and primitive believers, and learn, like them, to "deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ*."

* Titus ii. 12, 13.

SAINT PAUL.

SECT. 3.

Paul circumcised Timothy at Lystra—came to Troas—thence to Philippi, where Lydia and the jailer were converted—proceeded to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth—visited Jerusalem, and then returned, confirming the churches.

THOUGH Christians are indebted to the grace of God for every particle of excellence, which they possess, the effects of this grace are not equally conspicuous in them all. Frequently they, whose former spirit and conduct have been most opposite to the Gospel, shine with peculiar lustre after conversion. A larger experience of their own folly and perverseness renders them more humble and watchful: a stronger sense of their vast obligations to God for pardoning and subduing their iniquities, excites them to more lively and vigorous exertions in their holy profession. Such was the great Apostle, whose character we are contemplating. It is not spoken to the disparagement of other believers, when it is asserted, that we have known none more eminent in every Christian disposition and practice than St. Paul: nor was it the language of vain confidence or presumption, when he
said

said of himself, "In nothing am I behind the very chiefest Apostles *." Being constrained to mention his own case, he expressed an earnest desire, that the praise of all his attainments and usefulness might be ascribed to God alone. He declared, "By the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace, which was bestowed upon me, was not in vain: but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me †." May the consideration of his example rouse and animate our dull and inactive minds; and may the same blessed Spirit, which wrought effectually in him, enable us, also, to "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things!"

A. D. Upon his separation from Barnabas, having⁵³ chosen Silas as his companion, he departed from Antioch with the prayers and benedictions of the Church, and travelled through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the faith of the disciples ‡. When he came to Lystra, he met with Timothy, a pious and amiable youth, who afterwards attained considerable eminence §. St. Paul, being desirous of taking him as an associate in his further progress, and setting him apart for the work of the ministry, judged it expedient, that he should submit to the rite of circumcision. The performance of this ceremony was in itself a matter of indifference, but might in the present instance prevent some objections against them and their doctrine. Notwithstanding the liberty allowed to the

* 2 Cor. xii. 11.

† 1 Cor. xv. 10.

‡ Acts xv. 40, 41.

§ xvi. 1, &c.

Gentiles, it was still generally thought that all persons of Jewish extraction should conform to the Mosaic law. Now, as the mother of Timothy was a Jewess, (though his father was a Greek) it seemed probable that his case would be narrowly observed, and that, if circumcision were omitted, he would be unacceptable to the Jews, and Paul's intimacy with him give them great offence.

The conduct of the Apostle on another occasion was very different, and has excited some surprise. He firmly opposed the circumcision of Titus; evidently because it was insisted on as necessary to salvation, though Titus was a Gentile. On this ground, Paul would not consent to it, lest the doctrine of justification by faith in Jesus Christ should appear to be denied or renounced*. He had the largest views of Christian liberty, and was a zealous advocate for it; yet, in order to recommend the truth which he preached, he was willing to conform to the prejudices of others, in matters not essential. The case of Timothy was one instance out of several, in which "unto the Jews he became as a Jew, that he might gain the Jews †." We admire his meekness, self-denial, and disinterested regard to the credit and advancement of the Gospel. Such compliances are truly honourable, and may greatly add to a person's usefulness in the world. But let us take heed, lest we pervert this example, by making concessions clearly sinful or of a dangerous tendency, or by yielding even in things lawful through covetousness or ambition.

* Gal. ii. 3—5. † 1 Cor. ix. 20—23. See also Acts xxi, 21—24.

While Paul and his beloved companions travelled from place to place, and scattered the good seed, they saw the blessed fruits of their labours. Under their care the churches daily increased in numbers, and became more and more established in the faith. These messengers of Heaven were guided in their various removals, as well as in their preaching, by the immediate direction of the Holy Spirit. They opened their embassy in one district, where they were received as the Angels of God *, but were forbidden to do it in another, at least for a season. Having traversed a large part of Asia, and arrived at Troas, they collected from a vision in the night, that they were called to cross the water into Europe, and preach the Gospel in Macedonia. They obeyed without reluctance or delay, being prepared to pass over lands or seas, wherever the Lord should mark out their course.

The first town of note, to which they came, was Philippi; and, during their continuance there, some occurrences happened, which demand particular attention. The sacred historian minutely records the conversion of an individual, which proved the beginning of a large and prosperous church. On the sabbath day they took the opportunity of addressing certain women, assembled together in a place set apart for prayer. Many, it should seem, were present, but we read only of one person, named Lydia, who received real advantage. She listened with eagerness: "The Lord opened her heart." This favourable disposition is, indeed, accounted for; but let us mark

* Gal. iv. 14, 15.

its influence and blessing. Immediately she felt the efficacy of the Gospel; both she and her family were baptized, and her house was opened for the accommodation of those, who had brought her the glad tidings of salvation. Ah! why is it, that others refuse even an attentive hearing? Because ignorance, prejudice, pride, and sensuality, render us all averse to such subjects. Our minds are, as it were, closed against the truth of God, and resist its admission. O let us pray, that the Lord would remove the obstruction, and open our hearts! Thus only will the doctrine of Christ find a ready entrance, and make a lasting impression.

How various are the methods of grace! Lydia, probably, was wrought upon in a gentle manner, without any strong terrors or violent emotions. But we proceed to consider another conversion, of a different sort, and one in which the hand of God was more visibly exerted. Some singular circumstances, which preceded, were evidently ordered by the divine providence with a view to this event.

A certain damsel at Philippi under a demoniacal possession, pretending to a power of divination, bore a public and repeated testimony to St. Paul and his associates, as the servants of the most high God, and teachers of the only way of salvation. The multitude might imagine from such an attestation, that she was in league with the preachers of the Gospel, and that they were all impostors of the same kind, equally deserving of neglect and contempt. That there might be no ground, however, for the suspicion, the Apostle commanded the evil spirit to depart. The damsel was a slave,
and

and her owners had reaped large pecuniary advantages from her magical art. They now found, that their gain was at an end, and with great indignation dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates of the city, accusing them of sedition. Thus it frequently happens, that interested persons, whose dishonest profits are likely to suffer, bitterly inveigh against the zealous preachers and professors of our holy religion, and charge upon them that very disturbance, of which they themselves are the authors. By slanderous reproaches and malicious calumnies Satan and his agents may so far prevail, as to bring the faithful servants of God into temporary danger and distress.

The populace rose up with fury against these ambassadors of Christ. The magistrates themselves treated them most injuriously, condemned them without any fair examination, tore off their clothes, caused them to be scourged with many stripes, cast them into prison, and left them in the hands of an austere and inhuman jailer. He, too, as if he were glad of his commission, thrust them into one of the closest cells, and secured their feet in the stocks. Yet behold the situation and conduct of the servants of God! Where distress and dejection are usual, there we find them maintaining their wonted reliance on His power; where the heart of the stoutest commonly fails and is afraid, there they are rejoicing, and at peace. The darkness and horrors of the dungeon could not exclude the light of God's countenance: though their wounded bodies suffered sharp anguish, divine consolations flowed in upon their minds. At midnight they were heard to pray
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aloud and to sing hymns of praise. Their case, then, may encourage us to "commit the keeping of our souls to God in well-doing," whatever dangers may threaten us. "In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge *." They possess a never-failing source of peace and joy, of which they cannot be deprived by stripes, chains, and tortures.

It soon appeared, that this painful dispensation was appointed to accomplish the most gracious designs. The Lord interposed for the vindication and deliverance of his oppressed servants. While they were engaged in exercises of devotion, the earth trembled, the prison was shaken to its foundation, the doors thrown open, and all the fetters of the prisoners instantly broken. In this awful scene, our attention is chiefly directed to the jailer. Alarmed and terrified, under an apprehension that all the persons committed to him had escaped, he was about to dispatch himself with his own sword. Paul, however, knowing his purpose, happily diverted him from it: yet the alarm, given to his spirits, did not end here. Upon hearing the voice of the Apostle, the stout-hearted sinner, overwhelmed with fear and consternation, ran in, fell down at the feet of the very men, whom he had so lately treated with insult and cruelty, and cried out in deep concern for his soul, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Astonishing change indeed, accomplished by no less a power, than that which produced the miraculous convulsion of the earth!

* Prov. xiv. 26.

Paul and Silas could not but listen to his words with peculiar delight. They were ready to instruct the enquiring penitent, and, forgetting their own stripes, were most eager to heal his wounded conscience. Immediately they preached Christ to him and his family, assuring them that on their believing they should obtain salvation. The effect was wonderful. The jailer was converted, and, while by faith he committed himself to Jesus, divine peace and joy sprang up in his heart. How different, also, his outward behaviour, as well as his inward affections! He brought out Paul and Silas from their confinement, washed their lacerated bodies, and gave them food for their refreshment: both he and his domestics were baptized, and, probably, his house became a church for God. Thus the violent opposition eventually promoted "the furtherance of the Gospel." O why should you fear, if you are engaged in the cause of God and his truth? But, if you are fighting against Him, you cannot possibly prevail, however strong may be your party, however subtle and profound your schemes.

In the morning, the magistrates, probably terrified by the earthquake, ordered the prisoners to be dismissed. But Paul, with the confidence of an upright man, remonstrated against the injurious treatment they had received, and observed that as Roman citizens they were entitled to peculiar privileges, and might demand satisfaction. After this bold representation, they obtained a proper concession from the officers, and an honourable discharge. They did not rigorously insist

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on their rights, but shewed that they were men of peace; for, as soon as they had visited and comforted the brethren, they quitted the town, lest further tumult and disturbance should be excited. Such was the first planting of the church at Philippi, of which the most favourable testimony is given in the sacred records: and from such small beginnings, under the blessing of our God, works of extensive usefulness often take their rise.

Not discouraged by the violence they had met with, our Apostle and his associates pressed on to other services. Having passed through some considerable cities in Macedonia, they came to Thessalonica, a place of peculiar note*. There also, according to his custom, St. Paul resorted to the synagogue of the Jews, addressed his countrymen on the grand topics of the Gospel, and proved from their own scriptures, that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah. Nor did he speak in vain: many believed his report, and joined his company. But others soon discovered a different spirit. The Jews, who rejected his word, raised a violent and furious opposition: they collected certain low and profligate fellows, and threw the whole town into commotion. The house, where Paul lodged, was assaulted; and, though he escaped, Jason, who was his host, and some of the brethren, were dragged before the magistrates, and accused as persons disaffected to the government, and as general disturbers of the peace, who "had turned the world upside down." The prosecution, indeed, was dropped, but it became

* Acts xvii. 1, &c.

necessary for Paul and Silas to fly from the place under cover of the night.

It may be asked, Is this the pure doctrine of Jesus Christ, which is every where spoken against, which causes divisions and animosities in families, towns, and neighbourhoods? Can that system, which breathes nothing but benevolence, and is calculated to promote universal happiness, be liable to such objections, and produce such consequences? Yes, these are the very calumnies, these the effects, which we are taught will usually attend the faithful declaration of the Gospel: but they are to be ascribed to the perverseness of its opposers, and not to the nature or tendency of its principles. We ought not, therefore, to be staggered in our belief or profession of the truth. Shall the ministers of Christ dread the resentment of the world? There is a way to avoid it: there is a method of preaching, which gives no disturbance. But is this the scheme, you would recommend? Would you have them accommodate their message to men's vitiated taste, and say, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace?" Then, indeed, there might be no persecution; but the prospect hereafter would be tremendous: the deceived and the deceiver would perish together*.

St. Paul did not continue long at Thessalonica; but the fruits of his labours were glorious and lasting. His two Epistles to the church in that place, evidently shew that the Gospel prevailed and triumphed

* Matt. xv. 14.

in the midst of opposition. He speaks of the Christians there in higher terms, than of any other society. He thus writes; "Our Gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance: having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost, ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia *." How are the hands of ministers strengthened, and their hearts comforted, when they can give such an account of the people under their charge!

His letters, likewise, prove, how great was his tenderness among the Thessalonians, how strong his affection for them, how irreproachable his conduct. It should seem, that with difficulty he procured common provisions; or that he refused the offers of support from his friends, for the^o sake of recommending the Gospel by his disinterested spirit, and exhibiting a pattern of diligence. He "did not eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travel NIGHT AND DAY, that he might not be chargeable to any of them †." Sometimes he received relief from the Philippians: but this he neither sought nor desired ‡. What an example of generosity, patience, and self-denial, springing from the most exalted motives! Such were the lessons, which our Apostle had learned at the feet of Jesus §. Are we thus instructed? What have we been enabled to do, or relinquish, or

* 1 Theff. i. 5—7.

† 2 Theff. iii. 8.

‡ Phil. iv. 16, 17.

§ Phil. iv. 11, 12.

endure, in the service of Christ? Justly may we be ashamed to mention our own difficulties, when we read those of St. Paul.

After his departure from Thessalonica, he fled to the neighbouring city of Berea, and there, also, opened his commission in the synagogue of the Jews. The appearances were pleasing: the people discovered a much nobler disposition than the Thessalonians. They were willing to hear, and with great diligence and seriousness compared the Apostle's doctrines with the scriptures; nor do we wonder, that many embraced the Christian faith. It challenges and deserves enquiry, and to the humble and teachable, as it promises, so it communicates, knowledge and happiness. Those, who reject it, are generally too indolent or too bigotted, to give it a fair examination: and yet, with much arrogance, they call themselves free-thinkers.

But the labours of St. Paul were soon closed at Berea. He was followed by the storm, which had been raised at Thessalonica. The Jews pursued him with indignation, and stirred up a violent commotion. It, therefore, became necessary for him once more to consult his safety by flight; though Silas and Timothy, as being less obnoxious, ventured to continue there for a time, that they might carry on the work of God. Thus the opposition, as before, contributed to a more extensive propagation of the Gospel, and Satan defeated his own purpose. The unbelief and resistance of some were the means of sending salvation to many others.

Paul was conducted to Athens, a city the most ce-

celebrated for the study of philosophy and all polite literature. But, even here, profound ignorance of God and stupid idolatries prevailed, evidently proving the Apostle's assertion, that "the world by wisdom knew not God*." His mind was deeply affected by viewing the gross superstitions of men, who boasted of their superior discernment. Though he possessed a fine taste and improved understanding, he attended not to the learned curiosities and disputations of the place, which as a scholar he might have relished. But he felt a strong desire to correct the fatal errors universally received, and to diffuse the knowledge of his God and Saviour. To this end he bore his testimony in various parts of that renowned city. His sentiments, however, suited not the notions of proud philosophers. They despised him as a trifling, contemptible fellow, a mere babbler, who had nothing to offer, deserving of their notice. Others represented him as an advocate for certain foreign deities, when he preached Jesus and the resurrection. He was, therefore, summoned to answer for himself, and give an account of his doctrine before the high court, which assembled on the famous hill of Areopagus.

In such a formidable situation our Apostle stood forth to declare the grand principles of true religion. His address upon that occasion was masterly, and admirably adapted to the circumstances and character of the audience. He began with an observation on their uncommon attention to the worship of invisible beings, and said, that in his view of their devotional rites he

* 1 Cor. i. 21.

had particularly remarked an altar, inscribed "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD." While they, therefore, evidently confessed their ignorance, he avowed himself ready to give them instructions, in this important subject. He then insisted on some of the perfections of that God, whom they knew not, the God of creation and the God of providence; and proved, by an appeal to his works and to the confessions of their own poets, that he is the maker, supporter, and governor of the world. From these principles he argued with great strength against their idolatrous notions and practices. He affirmed, that this God had long borne with the folly of men, and suffered them to follow their own devices; but that repentance was now universally and indispensably required by the authority of Heaven. He further enforced the duty by the awful consideration of a day of future retribution and general judgment, of which, he declared, the Lord God had given an assurance by the resurrection of the Saviour from the dead.

There was a peculiar wisdom and dignity in the Apostle's address: but it should seem, that his audience interrupted him, just as he was entering on the most important topics. Conceited of their own erudition, they refused him a serious and patient hearing, and, as it frequently happens, rejected with a contemptuous sneer what they could not confute. Amongst many, however, who made light of his doctrine, there were some, who believed and shewed a strong attachment to him; and, of these, one or two of considerable rank.

It is supposed, that there was scarcely any place, in which St. Paul met with so little success, as in this celebrated city, among these accomplished scholars and acute philosophers. Justly may we cry out, "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world *?" In other ages and countries, many persons, admired for their sagacity and superior attainments in learning, have been among the bitterest opposers of the Gospel. And no wonder, since this system strikes at the root of our pride, and can find admission with those only, who are willing to become fools, that they may be wise †. It is no argument against Christianity, that it was rejected by these vain pretenders to science at Athens: nay, their rejection of it can be readily explained. But it is a strong evidence in its favour, that Paul was not afraid to propose and maintain it in such a philosophic city, and that some were brought over to his side.

Let us enquire, Who among ourselves have cordially submitted to the faith of Christ? It is worthy of the acceptance of the highest ranks: but if you, who fill an exalted place in society, are disposed to embrace the Gospel, like Dionysius and Damaris at Athens, how great are your obligations to that God, who has removed your prejudice and subdued your pride! Are there not some, who, with a shew of wisdom, are obliged to confess, that they worship an unknown God? We entreat you to listen to those, who would

* 1 Cor. i. 20.

† iii. 18.

declare him unto you. Your past times have been "times of ignorance," notwithstanding a superstitious performance of the formalities of devotion. O praise the Lord, who has been patient and long-suffering towards you; and now hear his voice, for he calleth you to repentance! We remind you of the final advent of the Saviour, and the solemnities of the universal judgment. These things are too important to be dismissed with a sneer. Consider them with fixed attention: believe, and be saved.

From Athens our Apostle proceeded to Corinth *. This large and flourishing city, which abounded in wealth and magnificence, was infamous, even to a proverb, for its general spirit of dissipation. It might seem, therefore, an unlikely place for the reception of the Gospel: but the ministers of Christ must "preach to every creature," depending upon God to make his own word effectual. When He is pleased to send it forth as "the Rod of his strength †," it accomplishes great events. It is "mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds ‡." At Corinth a numerous society of Christians was gathered, as we may learn from the two Epistles addressed to that church; and some of these had once been of an abandoned character.

Here he met with two pious persons, Aquila and his wife Priscilla, who had lately been banished from Rome for their religion. With them he took up his abode, and laboured for his support, as a tent-maker; for they had all been instructed in the same occupation.

* Acts xviii. 1, &c.

† Psal. cx. 2.

‡ 2 Cor. x. 4.

At first, probably, this attention to his trade was absolutely necessary; and afterwards he thought it expedient, that he might prevent or remove prejudices and objections, and prove that he sought not his own ease or interest*. His grand aim was to spread the knowledge of divine truth, and to "win souls." On every sabbath he stood forth in the Jewish synagogue as an advocate for the Gospel. Especially, when Silas and Timothy came to him from Macedonia, and enlivened him by their presence and good account of the churches, he felt a peculiar earnestness of spirit for the honour of his Master, and preached with fresh vigour. The Jews rejected his testimony, and blasphemed the Lord Christ, whom he commended to their regard. He, therefore, solemnly warned them of their condemnation, charged their destruction upon their own heads, and then turned from them to the Gentiles. He no more renewed his instructions in their synagogue, but from that time addressed the people, who were disposed to hear him, at the house of one Justus in the neighbourhood.

His labours were not ineffectual. Crispus, a man of some rank as being "the ruler of the synagogue," and many of the Corinthians, also, came forth and made profession of the Christian faith. Yet it was a season of distress with the Apostle; and it should seem that he gave way to an improper dejection of mind. He declares, that he had been with them "in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling †." A view

* 1 Cor. ix. 12—19. 2 Cor. xi. 7—12. † 1 Cor. ii. 3.

of the prevailing wickedness in that opulent city, a sense of his own infirmities, the contempt with which both he and his doctrine were treated, and an apprehension of danger, combined probably to discourage him; and it appears, as if he were ready to take his flight, or decline his work. At that juncture the Lord graciously interposed, commanded him to persist in his service with diligence and intrepidity, and promised him the divine presence, protection from enemies, and great success in his ministry among the Corinthians. He thus addressed him in a vision of the night, "Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this place."

St. Paul was emboldened, by this assurance from heaven, to continue at Corinth a year and six months, during which time he laboured in the Gospel with much assiduity, and to good effect. There also he wrote his Epistles to the Thessalonians, and, as some think, that to the Galatians. They were probably the first of his compositions now remaining. He forgot not the concerns of his distant brethren, but felt a painful anxiety for them, when he heard of certain instances of misconduct and declension in the churches.

The faithful ambassadors of Christ may be instructed from the example before us. It is nothing wonderful, that they, like this eminent Apostle, should be oppressed and discouraged by inward temptations as well as outward opposition. O let us not increase their

their difficulties by our contempt or unkindness ! Rather, let us strengthen their hands in God, by our cordial reception of the truth, and pray for them, that they may be upheld, and assisted in the vigorous prosecution of their important work. May much people be turned to the Lord, through their labours, in those very places, which they consider as most hopeless ! In this they may be confident and rejoice, that, wherever their Master has appointed them a service, He will continue and support them ; nor shall any violence of their enemies prevent or retard the purposes of his mercy.

At length a severe storm arose at Corinth. The Jews were indignant: they seized the Apostle, and in an outrageous manner brought him before the tribunal of Gallio, the governor or proconsul of Achaia. They accused him of introducing a new religion, to the subversion of the law ; but their accusation was rejected, and his defence forbidden, with equal contempt and disregard of both. Gallio would hear nothing on the subject, and therefore instantly dismissed the parties. He considered the Jews and their law, the Apostle and his Gospel, as beneath his notice: they were left to settle, as they chose, what was to him a frivolous contention: “ he cared for none of those things.”

St. Paul remained there some time longer, notwithstanding this strong opposition. It was not the mere clamour of enemies, which could accelerate his departure. When the time came, he took with him his two friends, Aquila and Priscilla : and it is remarked,

that at Cenchrea, a neighbouring port, from which he set sail, he shaved his head in consequence of a certain vow he had made, probably for a great deliverance. When they arrived at Ephesus, he preached the word with his accustomed zeal, but soon left his dear companions there, though they earnestly requested him to continue. He “ conferred not with flesh and blood,” pressing on with unremitting ardour, wherever his duty called him. He hastened to Jerusalem, with charitable contributions for the church; and, having finished the purpose of his journey, he called at Antioch upon his return, and made some stay in that place. He then passed in a regular progress throughout the country of Galatia and Phrygia, with a view of propagating the Gospel yet more extensively, and encouraging believers under all their trials and distresses.

How honourable the employment of the Apostle! Happy those, who enjoyed the benefit, and knew the value of his labours! What a glory and excellency distinguished his character, while he travelled from one kingdom to another, “ to turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God *;” “ as poor, yet making many rich †!” Instead of complaining of his arduous post, he was constrained to utter that grateful acknowledgment, “ Thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the favour of his knowledge by us in every place ‡!”

Here again we pause, and ask, Will any maintain,

* Acts xxvi. 18.

† 2 Cor. vi. 10.

‡ 2 Cor. ii. 14.

that

that Paul could be a deceiver? Could all these astonishing events, so exactly similar, which his preaching produced in different parts of the world, be the effect of mere fancy or delusion? Let infidels credit this, if they can. They will not, indeed, hesitate to admit any absurdities or impossibilities, rather than allow, that our religion is a revelation from heaven. But let us rejoice in the truth and efficacious influence of the Gospel; “for it is the power of God unto salvation, to every one that believeth *.” Let us not be satisfied with granting the sincerity, or even admiring the excellence, of the Apostle. Do we receive the doctrine, which he propagated? Does it regulate our faith and practice? We are not so much in danger of openly rejecting the whole system, as of trifling under an external profession, without experiencing “the power of godliness.” O let us be afraid, lest the word, which we hear and pretend to believe, should rise up to condemn us in the judgment!

The Lord God set his seal to the declarations of his Apostle; and we do not hesitate to assert, that He continues to this day, in a most decided manner, to prosper the labours of those, who deliver the same testimony. Similar effects attend the promulgation of the simple and unadulterated Gospel. “Many, like the Thessalonians, are hereby “turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven †.” Let us offer up our fervent prayers, that we may see more evident proofs among ourselves of a divine energy accompanying

* Rom. i. 16.

† 1 Thess. i. 9, 10.

the preaching of the cross. We have many precious promises, which should encourage our expectations of glorious events. Let those, who "have this ministry, as they have received mercy, faint not *," but be unwearied in their exertions for the enlargement and prosperity of the Church. May they be honoured of God, whom they serve in the Gospel of his Son, "by turning many to righteousness," and then "shine as the stars for ever and ever †!" Amen.

* 2 Cor. iv. 1. † Dan. xii. 3.

AINT PAUL

SECT. 4.

Paul came to Ephesus—was driven away by a tumult of the people—visited Greece—returned to Troas—raised Eutychus to life—passed on to Miletus—there sent for the elders from Ephesus, and took his leave—at Tyre and Cesarea, was dissuaded from going to Jerusalem, but proceeded thither—complied with Jewish prejudices—assaulted by a mob—taken into custody of the Romans—addressed the people, but furiously opposed—arraigned before the Sanhedrim.

THE page of history has celebrated the characters of many, who shewed uncommon ardour in spreading devastation and misery, whilst they passed from kingdom to kingdom. Such were Alexander and Cesar; who, however illustrious their names have appeared, were no other than the oppressors and murderers of mankind. How different the Apostle of Christ! His wisdom, zeal, and courage, were superior to those of the most admired heroes; and the motives of his conduct were noble and excellent, but their's sordid and base. We observe him continually planning fresh schemes, and burning with eager desire, to carry the Gospel from nation to nation, in defiance
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of all difficulties and dangers : and it is obvious, that he was actuated, not by the prospect of temporal emolument, dominion, or any carnal gratification, but by the purest affection, of which the mind is susceptible, love to God and to the whole human race.

From what we have already seen of the extreme violence of persecution, to which St. Paul was exposed in the cause of Christ, it might be thought that he would soon be discouraged, and decline all further exertions. Doubtless, this would have been the case, had he not been upheld by a divine support, and animated by a full conviction of the truth and excellence of those doctrines, which he preached. But we shall still behold him pressing on to new services ; like an undaunted conqueror, dissatisfied with former victories, and eager to subdue many more and far distant cities and kingdoms, whatever dangers or deaths might seem to obstruct his way.

A.D. We left him, after his journey to Jerusalem, 57 confirming the churches of Asia. That object being accomplished, he returned to Ephesus, a place of considerable note, but extremely addicted to idolatry and sensual excesses. Here he took up his abode for some time, and by his labours a large society of Christians was formed, to whom he afterwards addressed an invaluable Epistle, which is still extant.

Here he found certain disciples, instructed in the doctrine and baptism of John, yet not acquainted with that abundant effusion of the Holy Spirit, which had been granted as the blessed fruit and evidence
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of our Lord's ascension *. But, by the imposition of the Apostle's hands, the same miraculous influences were conferred on them, which other churches had received. Thus a glorious attestation was given to the Gospel at Ephesus; and, probably, others were thereby induced to become obedient to the faith. There may be many sincere believers, in a great measure ignorant of the extent of those privileges, to which they are admitted in Christ Jesus. We enquire of them, as Paul of the Ephesians, "Unto what were ye baptized?" and we exhort them to pray earnestly, that they may be favoured with large communications of that light, and strength, and comfort, which God hath promised, and is willing to bestow upon his people.

The Apostle opened his commission in the synagogue of the Jews, and endeavoured for three months together, by argument and persuasion, to bring them into subjection to the kingdom of God. But such was the perverseness of that people, that at length he declined all connection with them; and, removing from the synagogue to a public school in the city, he there continued, for the space of two years, to prosecute the great object of his ministry. During that period opportunity was given to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, as well as to the Ephesians, to hear his testimony; and the knowledge of salvation was diffused in an extensive manner. It pleased God to confirm his doctrine by many surprising miracles: diseases were instantly removed, and evil spirits dispossessed.

* Acts xix. 1, &c.

Certain wandering Jews, pretending to the power of expelling demons, were desirous to imitate St. Paul, and accordingly, in their adjurations, made use of the name of Jesus. They had observed the wonders it had wrought, whilst they knew not its true efficacy, or were impelled by sinister motives to apply and pervert it. A remarkable instance of this kind occurred in the seven sons of a Jewish priest: they conspired together for the purpose, but were baffled in their scheme, and nearly destroyed by the man, whom they presumptuously attempted to cure. The Lord Christ is not to be trifled with. He will not give his sanction to the devices of hypocrites, and sooner or later will detect their perfidy. It is vain, it is dangerous, for those, who are strangers to his character and live in disobedience to his authority, to profess an attachment to his person. Though they may seem to take his part, in opposition to Satan, and to plead his cause, by writing or preaching in defence of the Gospel, they are not likely to succeed better than "the seven sons of Sceva." Their efforts, probably, will not avail for the deliverance of others, and will certainly turn to their own confusion.

The defeat of these arrogant pretenders to a connection with the Saviour engaged the public notice at Ephesus, and stamped greater credit upon the Gospel and the ministry of the Apostle. Men were struck with an awful regard for the Lord Jesus, and afraid of provoking him by dissimulation. Convinced of the sinfulness of their magical arts, they burned those very books, from which they had derived their

former gains, and which they might then have sold for an immense sum. This was done in the open view of the town; and it is remarked as an evidence of the glorious efficacy and triumphant success of the Gospel. It is, indeed, "mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds*." Where its power is felt, every profane practice will be renounced, and even the love of money will be subdued. Have we given such a proof of our submission to Christ? Are we willing to forsake those occupations and habits, though most profitable, which cannot be retained with a good conscience? Ah! how many reject the word of God and perish eternally, because they are determined to hold fast their unjust gains! "Fifty thousand pieces of silver," and the accustomed means of subsistence, were sacrificed by these Ephesians: let those, who are attached to the world, say, if that principle be not most potent, which can produce such uncommon effects.

During St. Paul's abode at Ephesus, he was not unmindful of his friends and brethren at a distance. He meditated fresh services in other places, and burned with an eager desire, not only to visit the churches, which were far separated from each other, but to carry the glad tidings of salvation even to Rome, the metropolis of the world. For the present, since he prolonged his stay, he sent as his substitutes, into Macedonia, two of his beloved companions, Timothy and Erastus. About this time, probably, he wrote his first Epistle to the Corinthians, in which he mentions his

* 2 Cor. x. 4.

situation at Ephesus, as affording him opportunities of extensive usefulness, though attended with violent opposition: "A great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries *."

Satan may be expected to use his strongest efforts, by stirring up his zealous agents to resist the Gospel, when his kingdom is shaken, and "the pillars thereof tremble." In most places there are some persons, who, from their peculiar employments or connections in life, suppose their interest will be injured by the progress of true religion. Their chief emoluments, and even their subsistence, may seem to depend upon the folly and wickedness of others: and therefore, when the word of God comes with power, and turns men from their evil ways, these people, perceiving their "craft is in danger to be set at nought," will raise a grievous outcry.

This was the case at Ephesus. Demetrius, who derived large profits from the idolatrous worship of Diana, stirred up a furious mob against Paul and his companions. The Apostle would have ventured into the midst of the tumult, to address them on the subject; but he was prevailed on by his friends to consult his safety: and his example teaches us, that a prudent regard to our own preservation is consistent with the warmest zeal.

At length, the town-clerk or recorder of the city appeased the violence of the multitude, which threatened very serious consequences. He argued not on principles of religion, but, as a man whose natural dis-

* 1 Cor. xvi. 8, 9.

cretion suggested the necessity of moderation, persuaded them through motives of interest to desist from their outrageous proceedings. We perceive the hand of God even in such events. "He stilleth the noise of the seas, and," what is equally untractable, "the tumult of the people *." His avowed enemies come forward to promote his purposes, when he is pleased to make use of them: he frequently influences those, who bear no good will to Zion, to plead the cause of his servants. Let our dependence, then, be fixed upon him, and not upon an arm of flesh.

With a reference, probably, to this uproar, the Apostle said, "I have fought with beasts at Ephesus †;" and again, "We were pressed out of measure, above strength, inasmuch that we despaired even of life: but we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead ‡." Ah! why do we shrink from danger, while we are engaged in the work of such a Master? Let us contemplate the illustrious pattern before us, and be animated, by the view of his patience, faith, and courage, to endure to the end.

A. D. It became expedient for Paul to quit his
 60. situation at Ephesus, and therefore, having taken an affectionate leave of the disciples there, he directed his course to Macedonia §. Ever intent upon his work, he preached and exhorted from place to place, and thus passed on to the southern parts of Greece. In the midst of various distresses, inward

* Psal. lxxv. 7. † 1 Cor. xv. 32. ‡ 2 Cor. i. 8, 9. § Acts xx. 1, &c.

as well as outward, he prosecuted his journey to Corinth: and, having spent three months in that neighbourhood, when he was prevented by a design upon his life from embarking to Syria, he returned through Macedonia, and sailed from Philippi to Troas. There he remained seven days, and on the first day of the week delivered with peculiar energy an address to the disciples, who were assembled for the celebration of the Lord's supper. It should seem, that, as he was "ready to depart on the morrow," he was induced, under the thoughts of leaving them, to protract the service to an uncommon length: "he continued his speech until midnight." The more deeply our hearts are affected with divine things, and the stronger are our impressions of the love of Christ, we shall be more eagerly desirous both to declare and hear the glorious truths of the Gospel. The men of the world may wonder and revile: but, while they devote days and weeks to the pursuit of vain pleasures, let us not think a few hours too much to be employed in spiritual exercises.

The Christians at Troas met in an upper room, and it is remarked by the historian, that they had many lights: their religious assemblies, therefore, were not held in the dark, as some have maliciously insinuated. On the occasion now mentioned, a young man, inattentive probably to the Apostle's exhortations, was overpowered with sleep, and, falling to the ground from the window in which he sat, was taken up dead. This circumstance produced confusion and distress in the congregation, till St. Paul, having embraced the

body in faith and prayer, restored it to life. We lament, that there are among ourselves such numerous instances of drowsy worshippers, persons pretending, at least, to join in the divine ordinances, but so listless and stupid, that much of the short time allotted to the service seems to be slumbered away. Some may plead their infirmities or the prolixity of the preacher; but the practice is not to be justified. It betrays a want of true spiritual vigour, and a sad neglect, if not contempt, of God, which must be highly offensive to Him. Who would not be afraid of falling down dead in such a state, and where no revival, like that of Eutychus, could be expected? Who does not tremble at the thought of being thus summoned to the tribunal of Heaven?

The Apostle resumed his discourse, and was not willing to part from his dear friends till break of day. They spent the whole night in sweet communion with God and with each other. How rare an example of zeal and love! At length he left the place, and, for one stage at least, chose to travel on foot. He affected no pomp, and probably, in prosecuting his journey by himself, wished to secure some time for retirement. At Assos he joined his companions, with whom he took ship, and, having touched at different towns on the sea coast, came to Miletus. He hastened to Jerusalem, and therefore, that he might not be detained by the tender importunities of his Christian brethren at Ephesus, he passed by that city. He sent, however, for the elders of their church to Miletus, and addressed himself to them in a solemn and pathetic manner,

manner, giving them his last charge, and suggesting suitable instructions for the execution of their important office.

He appealed to their knowledge and observation of his conduct, for a proof of his integrity, meekness, diligence, and zeal, in the exercise of his ministry amongst them. He reminded them of the fidelity and earnestness with which he had preached, and of the grand subjects on which he had insisted, repentance and faith. He informed them, that he was going, under a strong impulse of the Spirit, to Jerusalem, and, though ignorant of the event, had received positive and repeated assurances, that bonds and afflictions awaited him there. Yet he declared, that, far from being staggered by the prospect, he valued not life itself, provided he could finish his course with joy, and fulfil his ministry by an extensive propagation of the Gospel.

He affirmed, that they were then looking upon him for the last time, and exhorted them to consider, that, as he had delivered to them the whole Christian system without reserve, he should stand acquitted before God, whatever might become of the people for whom he had laboured, and that they must answer for their own souls. He charged them, therefore, to maintain a constant care over themselves and every part of the flock committed to them, remembering from whom they had received their appointment, and how dear to God was that Church, "which He had purchased with his own blood." He warned them of false and destructive teachers, who would

soon arise and excite disturbances, and pressed upon them the duty of unceasing vigilance. He then commended them all to God and to the word of his grace, expressing the most earnest desires for their spiritual advancement and final salvation, and proposed for their imitation his own example of diligence, disinterestedness, self-denial, and benevolent attention to the poor.

The separation was truly affecting. Upon his bended knees he offered up his fervent supplications for them, whilst they with many tears wept over him and embraced him. We wonder not at their distress, as they were assured, that they should see his face no more, no more be favoured with his ministrations, his counsels, or prayers. They accompanied him to the ship, to bid him the last farewell, and then, as it were by violence, he was torn from them,

May we not ask, Is there any thing in this address like the language of an impostor? Do we not perceive the clearest marks of an upright man, and of a messenger from Heaven? O that all the ambassadors of Christ may partake of his spirit, be less attentive to the world, and more mindful of their important office! O that, like him, they may feel a generous concern for the people of their charge, and be solicitous to feed them with the wholesome doctrines of God's word! May Jesus, their exalted Lord, endue them with all necessary wisdom, strength, and zeal, and prosper their exertions for his own glory! May he teach and enable them to "take heed unto themselves and to all the flock!" So will they "not shun

to declare all the counsel of God," and, when they close their services on earth, it will inspire them with gratitude and joy, to be assured that they are "pure from the blood of all men."

Paul sailed from Miletus, and, having passed by several places, landed at Tyre, where he found some dear followers of the Saviour, and continued with them seven days *. In that city certain persons, under a prophetic impulse, warned him of danger, and entreated him not to proceed to Jerusalem. But, being confident that duty called him, he did not shrink from his purpose. Having taken a solemn leave of his friends, with whom he was not ashamed to kneel down in prayer upon the sea shore, he pursued his journey. He stopped to pay his respects to the Christians at Ptolemais, and then advanced to Cesarea, where he was guest to Philip the Deacon and Evangelist.

There he received more express information of the difficulties, which awaited him: Agabus foretold, that he should be bound, imprisoned, and delivered over to the Roman power. He was therefore most earnestly desired by his companions in travel, as well as by the brethren at Cesarea, to give up his intentions of visiting Jerusalem. But, as no dangers could intimidate his mind, he would not yield to their entreaties. Had he, then, no regard for his friends? Yes; and on that account he felt a severe conflict. He was not afraid to meet perils and death; but he could not bear to see those, whom he loved, overwhelmed with distress. He cried out, "What mean ye to

* Acts xxi. 1, &c.

weep, and to break mine heart? for I am ready, not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." This shews, that he possessed the tenderest affections, and that he determined to persevere in his purpose, only from a supreme regard to the Saviour, whom he served. The sorrowful supplicants desisted, and with humble submission referred the event to God.

Does not a sense of our indolence and timidity cover us with shame, while we contemplate St. Paul's unwearied exertions and willingness to lay down life itself in his Master's cause? Do we not value our friends, our ease, liberty, and safety, far more than the honour and favour of Christ? If his love constrain us, in any measure as it did the Apostle, why do we betray so much hesitation and reluctance in pursuing the plainest path of duty, merely because certain difficulties seem to obstruct our progress?

St. Paul, then, arrived at his journey's end, and took up his abode at Jerusalem with Mnason, an old disciple. There he met with a cordial reception from the church; and, having seized the earliest opportunity of visiting St. James, he related to him, in the presence of all the elders, how the work of God had been carried on by his ministry among the Gentiles. His account excited their gratitude and joy; but they warned him, that, glorious as his success had been, the strongest prejudices prevailed in his Jewish brethren against him. It was generally understood, that he every where encouraged the Jews to neglect and forsake the Mosaic law. They advised

vifed him therefore, with the view of filencing objectors, to join himfelf publicly with four perfons, who were bound by a particular vow to certain ritual obfervances, and to fubmit to all the ceremonies, appointed for fuch a purpofe. The Apoftle complied, not through a finful fear, or a temporizing fpirit, but in order that he might not wound any weak confciences, and, by conforming in matters merely indifferent, might gain the more to the love and fervice of Chrift.

Such was his condefcending and tender regard to the infirmities and miftakes of others. But how culpable was that hasty and uncharitable difpofition, by which many thoufand believers were ready to take up an exception againft a character, fo eminent and fo honoured as St. Paul! Shall we wonder, when we perceive fomewhat of the fame vehemence and bigotry among Chriftians in our own day? Yet, furely, we fhould lament, that, through mifconception and rafh judgment, they are frequently inclined to fufpect and condemn each other. And we ought to beware for ourfelves, left we entertain or receive an unfavourable opinion of a brother, without juft grounds.

Paul had begun to comply with the ceremonial institutions in the temple; when fuddenly a violent tumult was raifed by certain Jews from Aſia, who with great impetuofity exclaimed againft him, as an enemy to their nation and religion. By their bafe mifrepresentations the people were excited to fuch a degree of rage, that the whole city was thrown into confufion, and the Apoftle expofed to imminent danger.

ger. They seized and beat him, and were actually meditating his death, when Lyfias, the Roman officer, interposed with an armed body, and rescued him out of their hands. It was with extreme difficulty, even then, that he escaped their fury. At the command of the captain, the soldiers bound him, and conducted him as a prisoner and a malefactor into the castle, while the infatuated mob cried out, "Away with him."

Are we not constrained to lament the contumelious usage and confinement of this eminent servant of Christ? We may be disposed to ask, why the Lord should permit those, who are dear to himself, to be so insulted and oppressed, and the most zealous advocates for his cause to be prevented from prosecuting their schemes of usefulness in his Church. But alas! we are short-sighted creatures, and should not presume to censure or comprehend the conduct of Jehovah. "His way is in the sea, and his path in the great waters, and his footsteps are not known*." Yet we are assured, that these very afflictions, which for a season cut off the Apostle from the public exercise of his ministry, eventually promoted the advancement of the Gospel †. Our fears for the safety of the ark are groundless. Let us cheerfully leave the care of it to God, and commit ourselves and the concerns of all his people to his sovereign disposal. Whatever unfavourable or painful circumstances may arise, let us look in faith and prayer for a happy issue.

* Psal. lxxvii. 19.

† Phil. i. 12—14.

St. Paul was now in chains, but before he was committed to prison, he obtained permission of the captain to address the people in his own defence*. He began with declaring his extraction, education, and manner of life, and appealed to them who had known him, for a proof of his former hatred and violent persecution of the Gospel. He delivered a minute account of his conversion, of the Apostolic commission he had received from Christ to preach among all nations, and of the injunction given him in a trance to depart from Jerusalem. He had wished to continue in that city, expecting that his ministry would be particularly successful among those, who had been witnesses of his opposition to the faith. But Jesus, by his sovereign authority, commanded him to carry the message of peace to the Gentiles at a distance.

This open and ingenuous narrative of the Apostle seemed well calculated to impress the minds of the audience. His boldness in maintaining the Gospel before them, who had once known him as a blasphemer and a persecutor, is a strong evidence of its truth. But, though they could not deny his assertions, they were not convinced. The most striking facts, the most solid reasoning, and eloquent persuasions, will not be sufficient to subdue the human heart, unless God himself put forth his power, and make use of them for that purpose.

The Jews listened to the preacher, till he mentioned his mission to the Gentiles; but this they

* Acts xxii. 1, &c.

could not bear. Such was their contempt and hatred of all other people, that they concluded a teacher from Heaven would never be sent among the Heathen nations. The pretension appeared to them little short of blasphemy. They shewed every mark of indignation and abhorrence; tore off their clothes, and cast dust into the air, crying out, "Away with such a fellow from the earth; for it is not fit that he should live." Then indeed he was "made as the filth of the earth, and the off-scouring of all things *." If we likewise should meet with the most injurious treatment, let us not wonder or complain, when we perceive with what outrageous violence this man of God was rejected.

The Roman captain secured him, and, not understanding the ground of the opposition, supposing that he must have committed some great offence, commanded him to be examined by scourging, that a confession might be extorted. But Paul escaped the cruel torture, by pleading his privilege as a Roman citizen; and it should seem that the officer had exceeded his authority in binding him. Lyfias, however, was desirous to obtain clearer information of the business, and therefore, on the day following, convened the great council of the Jews for the trial of the prisoner according to their particular customs. There, for the present, we leave him, arraigned before the Sanhedrim, the object of their profane derision and contempt, yet not afraid of their terror, nor ashamed of the name of Jesus, in whom he believed.

* 1 Cor. iv. 13.

How much may we learn from this example! When we look at his patient perseverance in the service of Christ, and reflect on our own inactivity, well may we cover our faces, and hide them in the dust. How little are any of us doing, in comparison of this zealous Apostle! And shall we not be animated, by a view of his conduct, to be more bold and vigorous, while we maintain our profession of the Gospel against all its opposers? Listen not to the foolish representations of those, who would persuade you, that all fervour in religion is hypocrisy, fanaticism, or madness, and that every thing, better than lifeless formality, is an unnecessary strictness, a weak scrupulosity, or a dangerous innovation. If you would be governed by the fashionable principles of the age, you must keep at a distance from the least imitation of St. Paul, and, wherever you discover a resemblance of his spirit, you must condemn it as a ridiculous preciseness. You must give up all earnest contention for right doctrines, and all the ardour of devotion; you must affirm that faith is nothing but fancy, and laugh at the mention of spiritual peace, and communion with God through the Holy Ghost, as a vain delusion. O how much better is it to suffer like the Apostle in defence of the truth, than thus to sacrifice conscience to interest or reputation!

But, if you are the most lively, diligent, and useful members of the Church, the brightest ornaments of the Christian profession, you may learn from St. Paul to place no dependence on your own attainments. Like him, you should preserve a constant sense of your unworthiness,

worthiness, and ascribe all the excellency of your best principles and performances to the sanctifying influence of God's Spirit. When he considered, what talents he possessed, and what an eminent station he filled, his humble and devout acknowledgment was, "I am nothing:"—"not I, but the grace of God which was with me *." He renounced even his uncommon labours and extensive services, as of no avail in the point of acceptance with God: he gloried only in the cross of Christ, as procuring pardon and peace, and exulted as being "complete in Him." It will be difficult, we allow, considering your corrupt nature, to exert yourselves to the utmost for the advancement of truth and righteousness, and yet with unfeigned humility to cast all your works at the feet of Jesus, trusting wholly in the efficacy of his sacrifice and the merit of his obedience. But no otherwise can you maintain any well-grounded hope towards God. Your most admired duties, if not done in faith, will be rejected with abhorrence, and it will be said at the last, "Who hath required these at your hands?"

May the Lord Jesus Christ, therefore, be exalted in our estimation, as "the end of the law for righteousness!" With his holy Apostle, may we "rejoice in Him, and have no confidence in the flesh!"

Amen.

* 2 Cor. xii. 11. 1 Cor. xv. 10.

SAINT PAUL.

SECT. 5.

Paul made his defence before the Sanhedrim—encouraged by a vision—conspired against—sent to Cefarea—there pleaded his cause before Felix, and afterwards before Festus—appealed to Cesar—brought, and permitted to be his own apologist, before king Agrippa.

It was predicted by our Lord, that his Apostles should be brought before governors and kings for his sake *: but it does not appear, that any of them was called to this honour, so much as St. Paul. The great men of the earth, indeed, shewed no desire to be acquainted with his doctrine, nor was he admitted to audience in his proper character, as an ambassador from Heaven; but he was conducted into their presence as a criminal. How mysterious are the ways of Providence! Paul was cast into bonds, in order that he might declare the truth of the Gospel to magistrates and princes. We shall now behold him in this very situation, arraigned before powerful and malicious enemies, yet, without timidity or painful anxiety for himself, most earnestly solicitous to save the souls of his hearers. O for the same bold and disinterested spirit in all the ministers of Christ! This would be

* Matt. x. 18.

the brightest ornament of their profession, and the strongest recommendation of the religion, which they preach.

The Apostle was a prisoner at Jerusalem, in the custody of Roman soldiers. He had been with difficulty rescued out of the hands of a Jewish mob, which was incensed against him; and, the Sanhedrim being summoned for his trial, he proceeded to make his defence. He maintained before the council the integrity of his heart and conduct, though he had been apprehended and accused as a criminal*. His countenance, as well as his speech, betokened a holy firmness and intrepidity, the effect of conscious innocence, and the animating influences of the divine Spirit. The high priest, the president of the court, commanded him, in violation of all the forms of justice, to be smitten on the mouth, evidently shewing a determination to silence him, or to hear nothing in his favour. The Apostle, however, not intimidated by such violent and injurious usage, reprehended his judge, and solemnly declared that God would shortly punish him for his base hypocrisy. It seems, that there was an improper warmth of temper in the reproof: Paul immediately acknowledged, that he was not aware of directing his censure against the high priest. The intemperate exercise of power was with him no argument for resistance to authority, or disrespect to office. Yet, doubtless, he spake by a prophetic impulse; and, according to his sentence, God did soon afterwards "smite that whited wall" by a singular destruction.

* Acts xxiii. 1, &c.

The example, as it ought not, so it cannot be pleaded in justification of insolence or resentment towards magistrates: St. Paul himself was solicitous to guard against such an abuse of his conduct. He felt and bowed in submission to the command of the scriptures, "Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people*." Be it our concern to "live in all good conscience before God;" and then let us meekly commit to him the event of groundless and malicious accusations.

A prudent device of the Apostle disconcerted the measures of his adversaries for that time. He perceived, that the assembly consisted partly of Pharisees, and partly of Sadducees, who differed widely in their sentiments, especially concerning the resurrection of the dead. He therefore declared himself attached to the sect of the Pharisees, and affirmed that for his defence of their leading doctrine he then stood arraigned before them. As many as were of this persuasion, immediately shewed an inclination to favour him, and proposed his dismissal. But so warm were the debates occasioned by the subject, which he had started, that the council was thrown into the utmost confusion. The Roman officer began to fear for the safety of his prisoner, and, that he might not suffer through the fierceness of the disputants, interposed with an armed force for his deliverance, and conducted him back again to the castle. The Lord secures his people, amidst violent opposition, by various ways. Sometimes he protects them, by permitting their enemies

* Exod. xxii. 28.

to be divided and incensed against each other. The hatred and variances amongst wicked men are frequently so great, that they cannot unite in any schemes for persecuting the Church, as otherwise they would. Thus "the wrath of man shall praise God," and promote the purposes of his sovereign pleasure.

Our Apostle remained in close confinement, distressed, probably, by gloomy apprehensions, as if he were cut off from all further opportunities of usefulness. The following night, however, the Lord graciously appeared in a vision to encourage and animate him, by an assurance that he should still continue his labours in the Gospel, and bear his testimony even at Rome, the imperial city. How tender are the compassions of our God towards his afflicted people! In general, when their troubles increase upon them, "their consolation also aboundeth by Christ *." What, then, have they to fear? Or, what can man do against them? If the Lord declare his approbation, and say to them, as he did to Paul, "Be of good cheer," they should account it a sufficient compensation for their severest persecutions, and be imboldened to face a host of enemies.

Fresh dangers awaited the Apostle at Jerusalem. Such was the fury of his opposers, that more than forty of them entered into an impious combination, and bound themselves under a curse to take away his life. Even the chief priests and elders concurred in the murderous design. But, though the horrid plan might seem to be well concerted, it was detected and defeated

by the Providence of God. A young man, nearly related to St. Paul, being apprized of the scheme, carried information of it to the Roman officer; in consequence of which the prisoner was immediately removed, and sent under a strong guard to Cesarea. His accusers, also, were commanded to follow him, that the matter might there be fairly investigated before Felix the governor.

It may appear strange, that one, whose heart glowed with benevolence and a desire of promoting universal happiness, should be pursued with such malignity and rage, as if he had been the vilest of his species and the pest of society. But in the opposition, which was made to him and other eminent saints, a striking proof of human depravity is exhibited. Whilst they were treated with contempt and abhorrence, for righteousness' sake, it is obvious that the God, whom they served, was despised and hated: and indeed, this enmity of the carnal mind against God is the grand source and cause of persecution, whatever may be pretended. But shall the faithful followers of Christ be intimidated? No: it is their privilege to maintain peace and joy, in dependence on their Almighty Redeemer. But "they that hate the righteous shall be desolate." Their wisest plans shall turn to their own confusion. While they "take counsel together,—He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision*." Paul was rescued from his furious adversaries at Jerusalem, by the very conspiracy for his destruction. "They thrust fore at him, that he might

* Psal. ii. 2, 4.

fall; but the Lord helped him *.” Let others be encouraged from his case, “Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion; for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee †.”

St. Paul was secured in Herod's palace at Cæsarea, till his accusers came. After a few days, the high priest and other members of the Sanhedrim, with Tertullus, an insidious counsellor, at their head, appeared against him, and produced their charge before Felix ‡. The orator addressed the Roman governor in terms of the basest flattery, complimenting him upon the wisdom and excellency of his administration, though he was notoriously infamous for his oppression. He then inveighed against the prisoner, as having excited a seditious spirit through the whole body of the Jews, polluted their temple, and taken the most active part in spreading the principles of the Nazarenes, who were universally detested.

The Apostle, being permitted to answer in his own defence, protested his innocence, and challenged them to prove their allegations. He acknowledged, indeed, that his religious conduct was what they deemed heretical, but maintained that it was conformable to the ancient scriptures, in which he had been educated, and that his hope of a general resurrection was no other, than what they themselves allowed. He declared, that he uniformly endeavoured to discharge his duty both to God and men, that his journey to Jerusalem had been undertaken for the purposes of charity and devotion, and that his appearance in the temple had not

* Psal. cxviii. 13. † Isa. xii. 6. ‡ Acts xxiv. 1, &c.

been attended with any irregular or tumultuous proceedings. He, therefore, called upon his prosecutors to produce their evidence.

It is not probable, that you, who serve the Lord Christ, will escape unjust and malicious censures, whatever prudence or benevolence you may possess. Perhaps, the way, in which you worship God, may be reproached as heresy: but be not deterred by an ignominious name. It may be expedient, on certain occasions, to vindicate your principles and conduct: for that end you should be furnished with arguments; and, if you are truly upright with God, you also, like the Apostle, may be "bold as a lion" in the presence of your accusers. Only be you solicitous "to have always a conscience void of offence," that you may not provide them with objections, or give them any real advantage against you. But, if your own hearts condemn you, and the charges of your enemies be well founded, what shall we say? Though others attempt to justify and protect you, you will be a terror to yourselves, ready to flee, "when no man pursueth*."

What, then, was the issue of the trial? Felix deferred the cause to another hearing, that he might obtain clearer information. He so far, however, favoured the prisoner, as to allow him some degree of liberty, and permit him to receive the communications and visits of his friends. Nor was this the only privilege he met with, under his oppression and confinement. Whilst he was in that situation Paul was even called on to declare and maintain the Christian faith before this

* Prov. xxviii. 1.

wicked governor and his adulterous wife Drufilla. They shewed some desire to be acquainted with the doctrine of this extraordinary preacher: yet their motive, probably, was mere curiosity, which the Apostle did not endeavour to gratify. He aimed not to amuse them, but to fix an arrow of conviction in their consciences. Regardless of the event, as to himself, he addressed them with peculiar solemnity on subjects, which seemed calculated to awaken in them a sense of guilt, and to alarm their fears. "He reasoned of righteousness" before the man, who had practised extreme injustice and oppression; "of temperance" and chastity before those, who were then living in a state of incontinency, "and of judgment to come," that they might be excited to prepare for that awful account, which must be rendered at the tribunal of heaven.

Are we not astonished at the boldness of the Apostle, who endeavoured to bring his dignified hearers to repentance, rather than conciliate their favour and exculpate himself? But is not this the spirit, which all the ministers of the Gospel should possess? Without any dread of consequences, they should declare to the most exalted personages their guilt and danger, and, instead of using flattering speeches, "warn them to flee from the wrath to come." Who will not acknowledge the propriety of such an address? The careless and abandoned are often constrained to feel the force of divine truth. The haughty judge trembled under the words of the prisoner, and therefore hastened to close the interview. His heart was wounded within him, and he could not conceal

its horrors. But alas! unhappy man! he wished not to pursue the consideration of the painful subject; and yet he was not so obdurate, as to determine finally to relinquish all thoughts of religion. He endeavoured to pacify his conscience, by pleading his numerous engagements at that time, and promising a serious attention to the preacher at "a convenient season."

Did that season ever come? Alas! no: He resisted his convictions; and, while they were stifled, they could not be productive of good effects. Afterwards, indeed, he frequently heard the Apostle, and entered into conversation with him; but we do not read, that he trembled any more. He was actuated by covetousness, and, instead of enquiring for salvation, sought to obtain a bribe, for which he would have released the prisoner. But, as he failed in that attempt, he retained him in custody, though no crime had been proved against him; and even after two years, when he was recalled from his government, he still left him in bonds, merely that he might recommend himself to the Jews. What complicated iniquity was this! How lamentable, that the deep impressions, made upon his heart, should serve only to aggravate his guilt!

O sinners, beware, how you trifle with your convictions, when you are awakened to a sense of your misery by the faithful declarations of God's word! Like Felix, perhaps, you may be inclined to dismiss the preacher, and turn away from those offensive subjects, by which **your** consciences are alarmed. Are you resolved, **then**, to cast off all thoughts of God and eternal things? No: you hope that at some future opportunity!

portunity you shall be more at liberty to attend to your spiritual concerns. Ah! Sirs, what means this procrastination? Is not your short life hastening to a close? Is not judgment approaching? May you not be suddenly called to the tribunal of heaven? Or, may you not, by your unwillingness to submit, provoke God to leave you to your own devices, and to say in righteous indignation, "Let them alone?" To what other season are you looking forwards? Or what can be so convenient as the present? Do not, therefore, delay the important business. Yield to your convictions: stop not your ears against the truth, but desire to feel its full influence; and soon will your horrors and distressing apprehensions give place to the liveliest emotions of hope and joy.

A. D. St. Paul was left at Cesarea, and the rage of ^{62.} his enemies had not yet subsided. Festus succeeded to the government of Judea, and, upon his going to Jerusalem, received a powerful application against the prisoner from the members of the Sanhedrim*. They petitioned, that he might be sent for to Jerusalem, and intended to murder him by the way. But the scheme was defeated. Through the secret influence of God upon his mind, Festus would not comply with the request. He commanded the accusers to attend him to Cesarea, where he himself proposed to hear and decide the cause. There the trial was instituted, and Paul once more put upon his defence. The same groundless and malicious charges were brought against him, as before; and he, with his

* Acts xxv. 1, &c.

usual intrepidity, persisted in asserting his innocence. Still justice was denied him. The governor was disposed not only to trifle, but even to give him up to his enemies; for he proposed, that, according to their request, the matter should be referred to the council at Jerusalem.

What, then, could the Apostle expect from such arbiters? He saw through the design, and refused to submit. He declared his readiness to suffer extreme punishment, if he had deserved it, but maintained that he had done no wrong. As a Roman citizen, therefore, he claimed the privilege of being tried before the Emperor, and boldly appealed unto Cesar. This appeal, which stopped or suspended all further proceedings in the lower courts of the empire, was not the effect of cowardice: he did not shrink from bonds or death itself. But he has taught us, that it may be expedient for a Christian to assert his civil rights, and demand the protection and immunities, which the laws of his country allow him. We should, however, beware of a petulant and litigious spirit: the example before us will not justify a wanton opposition to government, or a propensity to contend for every little grievance.

It was determined, then, that the cause should be submitted to Cesar's decision, and Paul sent as a prisoner to Rome. Thus his desire of visiting that city was granted, and the divine promise fulfilled, though, probably, in a very different way from what he had expected. But, before he stood in the presence of the Emperor, another opportunity was given him for declaring the truths of the Gospel to certain personages
of

of exalted rank; and on that occasion he bore, as usual, an honourable testimony.

King Agrippa, who possessed a large extent of dominion under the Romans, and his sister Bernice, with whom it is supposed that he lived in a state of incestuous commerce, came together to pay their respects to the new governor Festus. During their continuance at Cæsarea, they were made acquainted with the cause of the Apostle. Festus informed them, on what grounds he had detained this remarkable prisoner in bonds; but, in his relation, he evidently treated with contempt the Gospel, which Paul preached, as consisting of unmeaning and superstitious questions concerning one Jesus, who was dead and yet was affirmed to be alive. Alas! it is obvious, from their confused accounts, that men do not seriously attend to the doctrines of Christianity. They, who feel not the importance of eternal things, trifle with the most solemn declarations of God's word: possibly, they may consider even the death and resurrection of Christ as an uninteresting story, and of dubious authority. How different are the sentiments of the real believer! With what fixed regard and lively joy does he listen to those, who testify of the crucified and risen Saviour! This is the subject, with which, above all others, he wishes to be acquainted.

Agrippa desired to hear the singular preacher, of whom Festus spoke; and the next day was appointed for that purpose. The court was summoned; the illustrious personages, together with the principal officers of the army and inhabitants of the city, attended:

tended: and Paul was brought forth to make his defence. When the cause had been opened by Festus, Agrippa intimated to the prisoner, that he would be allowed the full liberty of pleading for himself*. And now our eyes are turned to the Apostle, and we are solicitous to observe, how he acquits himself in such an assembly. In this difficult situation he shines with peculiar lustre, and exhibits the most striking proofs of wisdom, courage, faithfulness, and zeal. Here we contemplate the Christian orator, addressing his noble auditors with graceful eloquence, with evident marks of politeness and learning, yet with an artless simplicity, with a tender and affectionate concern for their everlasting salvation. He was anxious to recommend the Gospel, rather than himself, to their favourable regard. Agrippa being his principal hearer, to him chiefly was this admirable speech directed.

The Apostle, stretching forth his hand, that he might engage attention by his respectful and earnest manner, declared that he rejoiced in the opportunity of entering on his own vindication before so competent a judge, who was acquainted with the scriptures and customs of the Jews. Having requested a patient audience, he proceeded to state what he had once been as a Pharisee, and what hope he then possessed as a Christian. He alleged, that this hope towards God through the Saviour, which was the subject of promise to the ancient fathers, and the professed expectation and desire of all the Jewish tribes, had been the sole ground of his prosecution. He adverted to the

* Acts xxvi. 1, &c.

doctrine of a resurrection, and the absurdity of rejecting it as incredible, and yet intimated that none could be more prejudiced against that or any other truth, than he had formerly been against the whole system of the Gospel. He enlarged upon his enmity and bitter opposition to the Christian name, and gave a particular relation of that miraculous vision, in which Jesus had appeared from heaven, subdued his rebellious spirit, and commissioned him to go forth among the Gentiles, as a preacher of the grand mysteries of redemption. He affirmed, that, for his obedience to that mandate, his countrymen were violently incensed, and attempted his life. He devoutly ascribed to God his continued support in the discharge of his sacred function to that day; and maintained that Moses and the prophets predicted, what he taught, the death and resurrection of the Redeemer, and the offer of light and salvation, founded on those events, to the Jew first, and then to the benighted Heathen.

St. Paul evidently considered his own conversion, not only as a singular display of divine mercy, but as an incontestable proof of the truth of Christianity; and therefore he was ready upon every occasion to propose it to the notice of others, for the honour of his God and Saviour. And surely the account sufficiently justifies his conduct. Do we not allow, that he acted a reasonable and wise part, in renouncing his former errors and becoming a strenuous advocate for Christ? But are we willing to follow his example, as far as the difference of our circumstances will permit? What means our commendation of this

illustrious character, if we dislike those sentiments, tempers, and practices, which constituted its chief excellence?

The effect of the Apostle's address upon two of his principal hearers deserves our regard. Festus, considering the doctrines asserted as abstruse and ridiculous, or as enthusiastic jargon, concluded that the preacher, if an honest man, must certainly be deranged in his senses, though he allowed him the credit of being a scholar. He therefore interrupted the discourse, and cried aloud, "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad." The same objection has been often urged against all those, who zealously contend for the grand, distinguishing characteristics of the Christian system. Careless, inattentive persons, who take no pains to examine the subject, treat these sublime and heavenly truths as perfectly unintelligible, and the fiction of a disordered imagination. In vindication of themselves for rejecting the Gospel, they endeavour to cast an odium upon its advocates, and represent them, however sincere they may be, yet as men weak or insane, whose faculties have been injured by deep thinking on certain intricate points. But is the decision of such judges to be received? Or shall we be staggered by their insinuations? Then we must turn away with disgust from all, who are of Paul's complexion, and conclude, that, when men come to their right minds by submitting to the Saviour, and strenuously maintain his cause, they justly forfeit their reputation for understanding, and are no longer to be listened to. What a wretched infatuation

tuation is this! Let us not be deterred by such invidious censures, but be willing to be "fools for Christ's sake *," and welcome the reproach.

The Apostle replied to the charge with great energy, and yet with all proper deference: "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth the words of truth and soberness." He then turned to Agrippa, and, by a masterly and spirited address, appealed to him, as being convinced of the facts, which he had asserted, and of their exact correspondence with the ancient predictions. As if he perceived the inward feelings of his royal auditor, and would extort a confession, he said, "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest." Indeed, Agrippa's mind appeared to be deeply impressed. He could not, like Festus, deride or condemn the preacher, but, rather, was disposed to become his convert. He doubted not of his integrity, assented to the doctrines delivered, and seemed on the point of yielding an entire compliance with the Gospel. He replied, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." Probably, he resisted the force of truth, through the fear of temporal inconveniences.

This acknowledgment, though favourable, did not satisfy St. Paul. He was assured, that such partial convictions could never secure the salvation of the soul; and therefore he prayed, that neither the king nor any of the assembly might rest in them. With tenderest affection for all before him, he expressed his earnest desire, that they might thoroughly enter into

* 1 Cor. iv. 10.

his views, and resemble him, save in the chains, which he then wore: he wished them all the happiness, but none of the painful trials, which he felt. He exclaimed, "I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost and altogether such as I am, except these bonds." This devout aspiration clearly manifested his unbounded benevolence, his full confidence of the goodness of his cause, and the blessedness which he experienced in the midst of sufferings. He was not ashamed of being "the prisoner of the Lord," he envied not the king and governor their pomp or power; he could not declare his best wishes for them in stronger terms, than by praying, that they might be brought to the same state of mind with himself.

The Apostle was dismissed: probably, his noble auditors could bear no more. It was agreed, however, among them, that he had not deserved any punishment, and might have been released, but that, in consequence of his own appeal, the cause must be referred to the decision of Cæsar.

And now, upon a serious review of this history, we would enquire of our readers, not what is your opinion of St. Paul, (respecting which he himself would not have been solicitous) but what think you of your own character? What of the Saviour, whom he preached? Have you seriously attended to the doctrines, which he maintained? And what impression have they produced upon your minds? Perhaps, upon the first hearing, you have been disposed, like Festus, to treat them with contempt, as a visionary system, involving

only doubtful and superstitious questions. But, if you examine more minutely, and with more fixed and determinate regard, you will discover, at least, that Christianity is capable of being defended by solid and unanswerable arguments, and that folly is justly chargeable upon those, who affect to sneer at what they cannot confute.

If you allow the truth and excellency of the Gospel, we ask again, Have you unfeignedly complied with its demands? Ah! how many resemble Agrippa, and are inclined to resist or trifle with their convictions! You grant, that to be a Christian indeed, is a high and honourable distinction, and you profess a desire of attaining it. But you are obstructed by such difficulties, and assaulted by such temptations, that you have not courage, for the present at least, to attempt the arduous work, as thinking it impossible to succeed. Or perhaps, you may be willing to yield only a partial submission, as far as may suit your convenience; and thus, with apparently good impressions and resolutions, you may remain destitute of the power of religion. You are "almost persuaded;" and here you rest. Will this satisfy your consciences? Or can you seriously expect, in such a state, to inherit the promises of God? O why will you not consent to advance a little farther, and be "altogether," what you know you ought to be? There are those, of a sound understanding, and solid judgment, who can tell you of the blessedness, which they have found in the service of Christ. They argue rightly, that it is not a vain illusion of the fancy, but a delightful reality, by
which

which they are supported and comforted in severest dangers and distresses. With tender compassion and affectionate importunity, they press you to make the trial, that you may partake of their happiness. O credit their testimony, and reject not your own mercies! May He, who alone can subdue the human heart to himself, render the exhortation effectual, and persuade you to embrace the Gospel without reserve! May the mighty influence of his grace enable you to break through all your difficulties, and make you not only almost, but altogether Christians! Amen.

SAINT PAUL

SECT. 6.

Paul, sent as a prisoner to Rome—experienced great difficulties in his voyage—shipwrecked on the island of Melita—wrought miracles there, and received kindness—proceeded to Rome—dwelt and preached in his own house under custody—released—travelled and laboured as before—was again imprisoned, and at last beheaded.

THE promises of God in due season will be fulfilled, though the events, to which they refer, may seem to us in the highest degree improbable. What we call difficulties, cannot possibly defeat or obstruct the divine counsel. A firm persuasion and practical application of this acknowledged truth will produce in our minds submission, composure, confidence, and joy, throughout our various changes and calamities. If, in dependence on the gracious declarations of God, we believe that we “shall not perish, but have eternal life;” we shall cheerfully expect the final consummation of our bliss, whatever enemies may assault us, or dangers beset our path. We shall say, like the great Apostle, whom we are now contemplating, “The Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me to his heavenly kingdom*.”

* 2 Tim. iv. 18.

The history before us will shew, that this strong assurance of the divine faithfulness was not disappointed. Let us, then, take hold of the Covenant, which God hath established in Jesus Christ; so shall ^a all things work together for good," and with lively hope we may "cast all our care upon Him, for he careth for us *."

St. Paul had appealed to Cæsar against the malicious accusations of the Jews. As a Roman citizen, he claimed the privilege of bringing his cause before the Emperor; for it seemed, that justice was denied him at the inferior tribunals. The preceding circumstances, which led to this demand, were so ordered, through the controlling influence of God, as to be the means of fulfilling the declaration, that the Apostle must bear witness to the Gospel at Rome. He was accordingly sent thither, as a prisoner, together with some others in similar circumstances, under the care of Julius a Centurion †. They went by sea, and the voyage proved extremely distressing and dangerous. Paul was accompanied by two Christian friends, Luke the beloved physician, and Aristarchus a Macedonian, who cheerfully partook of his sufferings, and, as his faithful associates, afforded him peculiar consolation ‡. He was, also, treated with much kindness by the Roman officer; and therefore at Sidon, where they called, he was permitted to visit his pious acquaintance, and procure refreshment. From this place they proceeded to Myra, and, having there changed their ship, they were afterwards so retarded by

* Rom. viii. 28. 1 Pet. v. 7. † Acts xxvii. 1, &c.

‡ Col. iv. 10, 11. Philem. 24.

contrary winds, that with great difficulty they reached the Fair Havens, a port in the island of Crete.

As the season was far advanced, the Apostle advised the managers of the vessel not to prosecute the voyage before winter, and solemnly warned them of the extreme danger attending it, which had, probably, been intimated to him by revelation. But, his precaution not being regarded, they again set sail, and soon perceived their folly. They were overtaken by a violent storm, and driven to the utmost distress, even so as to be in constant expectation of perishing. For several days they saw neither sun nor stars to guide them, and, of necessity, abandoned the ship to the winds and waves. They cast overboard the articles of merchandize, with which they were laden, and, what seemed far more valuable in their circumstances, their very tackling: they apprehended that they themselves, also, should be overwhelmed in the deep.

How, then, did it appear, that Paul was under the immediate care and protection of Heaven? Unbelief might have suggested, that the promise failed, and that God had forgotten to be gracious*. But that season of extremity rendered the divine interposition, in favour of the Apostle, the more conspicuous, and shewed to all the company the peculiar excellence and worth of this prisoner. He stood forth before them, and, while he blamed their contempt of his former advice, exhorted them to dismiss their fears, on the ground of the Lord's express declaration to him in the preceding night. With

* Psal- lxxvii. 8, 9.

firmness and courage, he avowed, in the presence of idolaters, his relation and devotedness to the true God, affirming, "His I am, and Him I serve." He told them, how he had been assured by an Angel, that he must certainly be arraigned at Cæsar's tribunal, and that, though they must suffer shipwreck, the whole number of persons with him, amounting to more than two hundred and seventy, should be spared for his sake. Thus, then, a peculiar honour was put upon the Lord's minister; and the careless navigators, surely, were constrained to attend to his voice. They could not but perceive, that he was supported and comforted by a God, whom they knew not, and whom the winds and seas obeyed. They saw him composed and cheerful, amidst the roaring of the waves, while they themselves were oppressed with terrible fear. Who would not wish to enjoy the same confidence of the divine favour?

Trials and dangers manifest the advantage of genuine piety. For this end the Lord afflicts his people, that they may prove the tenderness of his regard and the power of his grace. He is glorified in them, when, through a dependence on his word, they can submit, trust, and rejoice, amidst storms and tempests. This is what others know not and cannot attain. We ask, Can you of a truth declare, as St. Paul, "His I am, and Him I serve?" Or, are you not ashamed to avow your attachment to him, in the presence of his enemies? If you do indeed confide in his mercy, his promise to you will be sure: "He will never leave you, nor forsake you." Though you may seem

to be tossed upon a troubled ocean, nothing shall separate you from his love, or prevent the accomplishment of his purposes in your behalf. Like the Apostle, "believe God, that it shall be even as it is told you:" you need not desire any better security for your hopes. You should, also, feel compassion, and offer many prayers, for those around you, in the same town or family, who know not the Lord: perhaps, they will be spared for your sakes.

After thirteen days of perplexity and distress, the mariners suspected about midnight, that they were approaching to some land, and were alarmed by the fear of being dashed to pieces upon rocks. They formed the scheme, therefore, of escaping in the small boat; but Paul prevented them, by declaring to the Centurion, that their continuance in the ship was necessary to the safety of the whole. Though assured that no lives could be lost, yet he thought it absolutely requisite to hinder their flight: and, if we do not remember that the events, which God hath promised, are inseparably connected with the means, which he hath ordained, our faith will lead us to presumption. The boat was abandoned: and, while they were eagerly wishing for the light, he expressed his confidence that all should be preserved, and encouraged them to take food for their refreshment, as their strength was nearly exhausted. He looked up to God, in their presence, with devout adoration of his goodness, for the bread which yet remained: he himself did eat, and they were induced to follow his example.

The day came on, and they perceived that they
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were approaching to the shore. They endeavoured to direct the ship into a creek; but through the violence of a current they were driven upon the sand, and by the force of the waves the vessel was broken in pieces. All was confusion. The soldiers, dreading the escape of the prisoners, proposed to dispatch them; but, for the Apostle's sake, they were spared. Unwilling to consent to his death, the Centurion interposed to prevent the scheme, and gave orders that all might be permitted to consult their own safety; and thus, the whole company were preserved by different means, and conveyed to land.

Do we not perceive the hand of God over-ruling these various circumstances, for the protection of his faithful servant, and with a view to the propagation of the Gospel? In like manner, He will render all events subservient to the final deliverance of his people: but in the mean season He proves their sincerity, by making them pass through much tribulation. We would encourage your expectation of a happy issue, if you be truly reconciled to him by Jesus Christ. Many and formidable dangers may seem to obstruct your path; but you shall surely reach the promised inheritance. In your own apprehension, you may escape with much difficulty, like the shipwrecked mariners before us, who were borne to the shore, "some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship:" yet the Lord, whom you trust, will bring you to your desired haven.

The scattered company were again collected on the island of Melita, where, in their distress, they met with
remarkable

remarkable kindness from the inhabitants *. Some circumstances, also, upon their landing, drew the general attention to St. Paul, and, perhaps, prepared the way for a favourable acceptance of the Gospel in that place. Whilst he was employed in assisting to kindle a fire, a viper suddenly fastened upon his hand.

He had been preserved from the violence of a tempest, and the rage of the sea: and now the venomous bite of a little animal was thought likely to be fatal. Ah! what is our life! To how many dangers are we exposed! No sooner are we delivered from one, than another succeeds; nor is there a moment, in which we are not liable to a fresh attack. Any trifling event, as well as that which appears most formidable, may prove destructive. But the serpent could not hurt the Apostle, whom the God of heaven was engaged to protect: he shook it into the fire, and felt no harm. The natives beheld and wondered. They expected his immediate death from this poisonous creature, and considered him as a murderer, whom divine vengeance had marked for its object. But, when they saw that no bad effect followed, they were ready to adore him as a deity.

A miraculous influence was exerted by the Apostle, not for himself alone, but for the relief of others. Publius, a principal person, probably the governor of the island, entertained the shipwrecked company with singular hospitality; and he was well repaid for his kindness. His father being afflicted with a disease, which threatened his life, Paul prayed for him, and

* Acts xxviii. 1, &c.

instantly restored his health. Different cures being also wrought upon other inhabitants, they were disposed to revere this man of God, and to provide both him and his associates with every thing necessary for their voyage. During their stay, which was three months, he, doubtless, took the opportunity of recommending the Saviour to their notice and acceptance, and improved the time of his abode amongst them for the most valuable purposes. Such was his fervent zeal, that he could not refrain his lips from proclaiming the rich mercy of God in Jesus Christ. And perhaps, this shipwreck proved the happy means of healing the souls as well as the bodies of many of these courteous islanders, and of extending salvation to them who were ready to perish.

At length the company departed from the place, and, after touching at Syracuse and Rhegium, came to Puteoli, where, at the request of certain Christians, Paul and his friends obtained permission to remain a week. Afterwards he proceeded by land towards Rome. The account of his approach had reached that famous city; and in such estimation was he there held among them who had embraced the faith, that they went out to meet him, some to the distance of fifty, others of more than thirty miles, and conducted him on the road.

Their kind attendance in such circumstances afforded him peculiar pleasure: it excited gratitude to God, and inspired him with fresh life and vigour. Perhaps he began to droop: but, when he saw the dear brethren, to whom he had written his invaluable

luable Epistle a few years before, and over whom he had rejoiced as fellow-heirs of the kingdom, he was cheered and animated. "He thanked God, and took courage." Then he was willing, that Nero should do his worst: he shrunk not from danger or death, when he perceived some of the glorious effects of divine grace among the inhabitants of Rome; and he gave vent to the noblest affections, while he felt a warm attachment to these followers of his Lord, and the strongest emotions of delight in their society. We ask, Is this the kind of happiness, which you have experienced? Do you "love the brotherhood," or know any thing of "the communion of saints?" Would the very sight of them revive your hearts, when oppressed with trouble? We pity you, as strangers to the most exquisite sensibility, if you have not tasted the sweetness of Christian friendship. But, if you enjoy that inestimable privilege, we exhort you to improve it for mutual edification and comfort. Value your opportunities of intercourse with pious persons, and, by your conversation and prayers, endeavour to inspire each other with a holy fortitude, though you are travelling together, as Paul and his companions were, to meet a powerful and malignant enemy.

When they came to Rome, the prisoners were delivered to the proper officer; but the Apostle, being separated from the rest, was permitted, by peculiar favour, to dwell in an habitation of his own, under the custody of a soldier, to whom, probably, he was chained. In this new situation, he shewed the same
zeal

zeal and courage for the defence and propagation of the Gospel, as before. . Three days after his arrival, he sent for the principal persons among the Jews, who resided there, and explained to them the true cause of his imprisonment. He assured them, that he was brought into those circumstances, not for any real offence committed, but only for maintaining "the hope of Israel," and publishing that salvation, which had been promised to this people, and was then procured for them by their long expected Messiah.

They had nothing to allege in reply, except the general prejudice, which has always been urged as an objection to the religion of Jesus, when its powerful influence appears; "This sect is every where spoken against." Many desired to hear his account of Christianity: a time was set; and for a whole day together he continued to expound and prove the doctrines of the Gospel from their own scriptures, and earnestly persuaded them to accept the Saviour. The effect was different upon different persons; some of them embracing the faith, but others rejecting it with contempt. While they contended among themselves, the Apostle dismissed them with that prophetic admonition, which was once delivered to their fathers, denouncing a judicial blindness and obduracy of heart, as a punishment for slighted mercy *. He then declared, that, having proposed to them the offer of salvation, he should turn to the Gentiles, and doubted not of a favourable reception.

* Isa. vi. 9, 10.

In this state of confinement St. Paul remained two years; his cause being neglected or deferred by the Emperor. But, even there, he obtained peculiar indulgence, and was eminently honoured as an instrument of extensive good. Though a prisoner, he met with no interruption: his labours were more private and contracted than before, but they were still unceasing. All, who chose, had free access to him for instruction; and he continued, without fear or restraint, to exhibit the glorious character of the Redeemer, and inculcate a cordial submission to the government of his grace. Yet wise and earnest as his exhortations were, we wonder not that they were despised by many, on account of the ignominious situation of the preacher. Whilst he appeared as a criminal, chained by the hand to a common soldier, there must have been a strong prejudice against him, and a considerable difficulty in believing, that he was so distinguished a messenger of Heaven, appointed to declare the way of salvation. But some were disposed by a divine influence to look beyond the meanness of his external circumstances, and to receive his word with reverence and obedience, as the word of the living God. O how great is the mercy, to be delivered from all those carnal regards and common objections, which unfit the mind for a fair examination of the truth!

We learn from several of St. Paul's Epistles, that his labours at Rome were attended with great success. There had been indeed, for some years, a society
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of Christians in that place, whose "faith was spoken of throughout the whole world *." But at this time they became more confirmed in their principles, and saw their numbers increase. The Lord God can make his cause and his people to prosper under the heaviest pressures, and in spite of the most violent opposition. We might have thought, while the Apostle was a prisoner for the Gospel's sake, that men would have been afraid or ashamed to profess any attachment to him or his doctrines. But the contrary effect appeared; and it wonderfully displayed the hand of God. "Many of the brethren, waxing confident by his bonds, were much more bold to speak the word without fear †." Fresh converts were added to the church. Onesimus, who, it should seem, had been a dishonest servant of Philemon, heard the preacher in his confinement, and, being brought to repentance, became "a faithful and beloved brother ‡." Then, also, the Gospel found admission, where we should have imagined it impossible to succeed, even in the court of Nero. That profane prince hated and persecuted this new religion: but some of his attendants or domestics were led to examine and embrace it, in consequence of the imprisonment of its most strenuous advocate, and proved an honour to their profession ||.

How mysterious are the ways of God! He accomplishes his purposes by such means, as we should never have devised. What situation could be more unfavourable to Christianity, than the palace of the

* Rom. i. 8. † Phil. i. 14. ‡ Philem. 10. Col. iv. 9.

|| Phil. i. 13. iv. 22.

Emperor? But Jehovah “will work; and who shall let it*?” An Apostle is sent to Rome under criminal accusations, and pleads his cause before Cesar, in order that some of the household may hear and be converted. The dark dispensation was big with mercy. The events, which we should have lamented, as most deplorable, were designed to confirm and propagate the Gospel. Let us cheerfully leave the care of the Church in the Lord’s hands. He reigneth: and He best knows what is most expedient for his own glory.

The various societies of Christians in different parts, and even to this very day, have reaped great advantage from the bonds of St. Paul. Had he not been a prisoner, he might not have written so large a portion of the sacred volume. Some of the rich fruits of his confinement, we perceive in those excellent Epistles, which are addressed to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Hebrews: and we praise God, that the leisure, afforded him at Rome, was employed for our profit. It appears from those animated and inspired compositions, that he rejoiced in his sufferings, and was so far carried above the fear of death, as to exult in the prospect†. It has been thought, that he then felt, more than ever, the blessedness of his own principles, and enjoyed a peculiar elevation of soul. O let us not shrink from afflictions! They may be designed to confirm and increase our experience of the power and comforts of true religion.

* Isa xlii. 13.

† Col. i. 24. Phil. i. 20—24.

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The distresses of the Apostle gave occasion to some kind and liberal exertions among his friends. He received seasonable supplies for his support from the Christians at Philippi, by that honoured messenger Epaphroditus, "who ministered to his wants *." Onesiphorus, also, is commended, for having "often refreshed him, and not being ashamed of his chain †." But he met with trials more painful than the fury of his avowed enemies, from the perfidy of false professors, and the unsteadiness of certain sincere believers. "All they," says he, "which are in Asia, are turned away from me ‡." Many of his former friends were so influenced by selfish regards or misconceptions of his conduct, as to shew a strange disaffection. Nay, he declares, that when he was brought before Nero, "at his first answer, no man stood with him; but all men forsook him §." Such a general desertion was beyond measure afflictive. We are ready to ask, Where were the Christians, whom he celebrated in his Epistle? Where the brethren, who travelled fifty miles to meet him? Or why this change of disposition? How forcibly does this teach us, that "it is better to trust in the Lord, than to put confidence in man ||!" Yet let us beware of drawing rash conclusions, or condemning all those as hypocrites, who may betray an occasional weakness and timidity. Such weakness and timidity have appeared in the best and most eminent men; as we might instance in our great reformer Arch-

* Phil. ii. 25. iv. 18. † 2 Tim. i. 16. ‡ 15. § iv. 16.

|| Psal. cxviii. 8.

bishop Cranmer, and in the Apostle Peter. Perhaps the very persons, who behaved in this disgraceful manner at Rome, were afterwards recovered, and enabled to give decisive proofs of integrity, fortitude, and zeal.

A. D. At the end of two years, St. Paul, being⁶⁵ arraigned before the Emperor, was honourably acquitted, and restored to his liberty. That cruel and haughty tyrant seemed unlikely to favour the prisoner: but Nero's fury was restrained, because it was designed, that the life of this faithful ambassador for Christ should be spared a little longer for the benefit of the Church. Hear his own account: "The Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion *." O'be encouraged to persevere with holy fervour and intrepidity, if you serve the Lord Christ! Your divine master will surely protect you against all the machinations of your opponents, and support you in your place, till the work assigned you be completed.

After his release, the Apostle travelled as before, and continued with his usual assiduity to propagate the Gospel. During that time, which was two or three years, he made a journey to Spain, and, as some have thought, to France, and, possibly, to this Island †. Perhaps, he took another circuit among the Asiatic churches, established Christian societies in Crete, which he committed to the care of Titus, and again visited

* 2 Tim. iv. 17.

† Rom. xv. 24.

the Philippians, as he had intimated, “for their furtherance and joy of faith*.” This, at least, is evident, that he was not ashamed or weary of the service, in which he had embarked, and that he ceased not from his labours of love; till he put off his earthly tabernacle. He returned to Rome, with the view, probably, of confirming his former testimony in that city, and, on some pretence or other, was once more cast into prison. St. Chrysostom relates, that, a concubine of Nero being converted by means of the Apostle, the tyrant was exasperated, commanded him to be taken into custody, and soon afterwards put him to death.

In that last confinement he wrote his second Epistle to Timothy, under the expectation of suffering; and for that reason it contains his most deliberate sentiments and most solemn views of eternity. It appears, that he did not repent of his exertions in the service of his Lord, did not fluctuate in his opinions, or stagger in his hopes. The strain in which he writes, the language of victory over death and hell, abundantly manifests, that he still wished to encourage others in the faith, and exulted in his own prospects of heaven. How animated are his expressions! “I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day†.” “I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight,

* Phil. i. 25. ii. 24. Titus i. 5. Philem. 22. Heb. xiii. 23.

† 2 Tim. i. 12.

I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing *." The knowledge and the love of Christ will enable us likewise to speak the same language, and inspire us with confidence and joy, though we should see death approaching in the most tremendous forms. Ah! how few have felt the full influence of the Gospel, or attained its exalted privileges! This may teach us to account for our sloth and cowardice. While we are strangers to the grace of Jesus, it is no wonder that we decline every arduous service, and tremble at the intimations of our dissolution.

A. D. St. Paul closed his life in the most honourable
 67. manner, and sealed with his blood the doctrines, which he had long so zealously maintained. He suffered about the same time as St. Peter, but not by crucifixion: being a Roman citizen he was beheaded. It is surprising, not that he was cut off by the hand of violence at last, but that so firm an advocate for the Gospel should be spared so long, in the midst of powerful and malignant opposers. How eminent does his character appear! How valuable his labours! How glorious his death! Do we not consider his crown of martyrdom, as an enviable distinction? Let us fight the good fight of faith; and we also shall conquer, as he did, when taking leave of the world.

He was exalted above others by his wisdom, zeal,

* 2 Tim. iv. 6—8.

and success; by gifts, visions, and revelations of the Lord. "He was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words *." He "was not a whit behind the very chiefest Apostles †:" nay, he "laboured more abundantly than they all ‡," and, probably, possessed peculiar powers and authority in his high function ||. But, notwithstanding his honourable privileges, his sufferings were extreme: and even in these he seemed more especially to exult. Let us hear his own account: "We are troubled on every side,—perplexed,—persecuted,—cast down,—always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus §:" "in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings †." "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck; a night and a day I have been in the deep: in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Besides those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches **."

* 2 Cor. xii. 4. † xi. 5. ‡ 1 Cor. xv. 10. || 1 Cor. v. 4, 5.
2 Cor. x. 8. xiii. 10. § 2 Cor. iv. 8—10. † vi. 4, 5.

** xi. 24—28.

He had one particular trial, of which a clear account is not given us. He calls "it a thorn in the flesh *;" which implies that it was something as painful to his mind, as a sharp or pointed instrument, continually piercing him, would be to his body. Some suppose it to have been a deformed appearance, or difficulty of elocution; to his enemies a handle for reproach, and to himself the occasion of distress, as it rendered his preaching less acceptable. The objection was urged; "His bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible †." ♦ This seemed likely to obstruct his usefulness, and might excite in him the keenest anguish. But, whatever the affliction was, his spiritual adversary took the advantage, and made it the ground of a severe temptation: it was "the messenger of Satan to buffet him." Yet God permitted it for his good, and designed it to prevent or counteract any bad effect, which his eminence in the Church might produce upon his mind: it was given to him, "lest he should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations." In this, however, as in other trials, he sought relief from heaven. He prayed with peculiar importunity, and obtained that remarkable assurance from the Saviour, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." Upon this, his fears were dispersed; and, perceiving a peculiar suitableness and mercy in the appointment, he declared, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." The example is highly instruc-

* 2 Cor. xii. 7—10.

† x. 10.

tive: it shews us the nature, necessity, and salutary tendency of those calamities and temptations, by which advanced believers are frequently oppressed; and it likewise teaches us, with what temper of mind we should suffer, and what strong support and consolation we may expect, if we confide in the Redeemer.

After all, the most distinguishing lineaments in the Apostle's character were an unshaken and affectionate attachment to his Lord, an extensive and generous benevolence to men, and an ardent desire to save their souls, whatever dangers he himself might sustain. The warmest professions seemed too weak to express the fervour of his heart. What words are those! "The love of Christ constraineth us*." "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you, though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved†." "Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy and rejoice with you all‡."

We are aware, that even a distant resemblance and imitation of the pattern here exhibited would now be laughed at, as the sure mark of madness and enthusiasm. But the fear of such reproach ought not to deter us: it will be an honourable badge, in which we may glory. Few, alas! are in danger of coming under that censure. Are not we very remote from that peculiar excellency of temper and conduct, for which the Apostle has been so justly celebrated? And will it avail us any thing, to admire this bright example, or that of any other saint, if we persist in

* 2 Cor. v. 14.

† xii. 15.

‡ Phil. ii. 17.

those practices, which are totally dissimilar and opposite? No: we shall thereby betray, more evidently, our own baseness, and render more sure our final condemnation. But, if with sincerity of heart we desire and endeavour to follow St. Paul, as he followed Christ, we may triumph in the hope of being where he is, and of joining the glorious company of those, who are redeemed to God from the earth, and who shall surround his throne for ever.

CORNELIUS:

CHAP. X.

Cornelius, a Roman Centurion—his devotion and liberality—was encouraged by an Angel, and directed to send for St. Peter—received the Apostle and desired his instructions—was endued with the Holy Ghost and baptized—requested Peter's continuance—probably retained his situation in the army.

THE calling of the Gentiles and their admission into the Christian Church is an event of great importance in ecclesiastical history; and a distinct account is given us of the way, in which that gracious dispensation was introduced. The Apostles had been charged to teach all nations, and to receive by baptism those, who should profess the faith*; but so partial were their views, so bigotted their minds in favour of their own countrymen, that a particular revelation seemed necessary to explain to them the extent of their commission, and dispose them to accept the Gentiles as fellow heirs. At length, the divine will being manifested in such a manner as to exclude all doubt, the partition wall was broken down: those, who had been "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel," were

* Matt. xxviii. 19.

taken into the Church of Christ, and admitted to its full privileges.

Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, was selected from the Pagan world, as the first instance of this distinguished mercy, and, by the express appointment of Heaven, enrolled among the number of the faithful *. It is in vain for us to demand the reason, why he obtained this honourable preference, since God distributes his favours as He pleases; but such was his amiable character before his extraordinary call, that he seemed less likely than many others to excite the prejudices of the Jews. He was a man of integrity and seriousness, under the guidance and renewing influence of the Holy Ghost: his views, indeed, were imperfect and dark, but he walked uprightly, according to the light, which faintly glimmered on his path. He had been led, perhaps in a gradual manner, to seek reconciliation with God; and therefore, though ignorant of the particular dispensation revealed in the Gospel, he possessed a previous preparation of mind for its reception. With his convictions and impressions, he could not but be ready to accept the salvation of Christ, when fairly proposed.

In all cases conversion is effected by the agency of God, “from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed †.” The very first tendency to real, spiritual religion, its beginning, as well as its continuance, progress, and perfection in the soul, must be ascribed to Him; “for it is God, which worketh in you both to will and to do, of his

* Acts x. 1, &c.

† Second Collect at Evening prayer.

good pleasure *.” But the methods of his grace are different with different persons. With some a sudden change is produced; their darkness is almost instantly dispersed; hope and comfort break in upon them; and they soon attain a clear and decisive evidence of their acceptance. But others discover a gradual alteration, and, though seriously disposed and truly devoted to God, remain in much ignorance and perplexity. It may be difficult, for some time, to pronounce concerning their state: yet of this we are assured, that the seed of God, implanted in the soul, is incorruptible, and will spring up to everlasting life †. Whatever delays or obstructions there may be, the final issue will be safe and glorious.

Cornelius, as being uncircumcised and a “stranger from the covenants of promise,” was deemed unclean by the Jews; yet, as we have suggested, he had been brought under good impressions, and delivered from the foolish and wicked practices of idolatry. Though a Roman soldier, he did not worship the gods of his country; but, in consequence, probably, of his residence in Judea, he had become acquainted with the scriptures of the old testament, and was led to revere the God of Israel. Even now, he is said to have been “a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house.” Being sincerely desirous to know and do the will of God, he was strictly attentive to the duties of religion, as far as his information carried him; and, feeling a serious concern for the souls of his domestics, he engaged them in the same holy ex-

* Phil. ii. 13.

† 1 Pet. i. 23. 1 John iii. 9.

ercises with himself. He discovered, also, a liberal disposition in relieving the distresses of the poor, as well as a peculiar fervour of mind towards God by the constancy of his prayers. His benevolence and piety were beautifully connected; and they added a lustre to each other. How excellent and lovely the character!

If we truly understand the Christian faith, we have received clearer light, and are laid under stronger obligations; but do we surpass or even imitate the pattern here exhibited? Are we impressed with an awful sense of the majesty of God, and an earnest desire to please him? Do we enforce the principles of religion in our respective habitations, and endeavour to communicate the knowledge, which we have attained, to those who are immediately subject to our influence? Do we direct and accompany them to the throne of grace? Ah! how many families never associate together to own their dependence upon God, in their domestic capacity! And is not the neglect disgraceful to the profession of the Gospel?

A serious attention should be paid to different duties; so that all may have their proper place and proportionable regard. While you shew a generous solicitude for the souls of others, convince them that you are ready to relieve their bodily necessities. True piety cannot consist with covetousness. If there be any pretenders to devotion, who "shut up their bowels of compassion," they will be condemned by the example of Cornelius, even before he knew the Gospel. Yet, on the other hand, the most liberal contributions

tributions to the poor will not compensate the want of godliness. We ask, then, if you "give much alms to the people," what are you offering to God? Are not his claims denied or withheld? Do you "pray alway," or seize upon every opportunity to "pour out your heart before him?" You plead, perhaps, your numerous engagements, the peculiar snares and difficulties of your situation, as if they rendered the performance of religious duties impossible. But we refer you to the case of Cornelius, who, though a foldier, in the midst of occupations and connections extremely unfavourable to every thing of a serious tendency, yet maintained a course of solid and exemplary piety. Your neglect arises, not so much from want of opportunity, as a secret aversion to the service of God; and therefore you are inexcusable.

An improper use of the excellent character before us, has been made by some, who deny the necessity of Revelation under the absurd idea that what they call natural religion is sufficient. It is argued, that men by the light of reason and their own moral powers may attain to such a state, as to want no further information or assistance. But this is a conclusion, which the present history does not warrant. Cornelius, probably, as we have intimated, was instructed in the principles of the Jews, and indebted to the sacred writings for all his knowledge of the true God. It is allowed, that he was upright, and his goodness conspicuous. But the whole account shews, that his righteousness was defective: he was taught to seek remission of his sins through the dispensation of the Gospel,

pel, and ascribe his acceptance with God to Christ alone. This case, surely, ought not to be appealed to by those, who would set aside the mediation of the Son of God.

Through the influence of divine grace, Cornelius had been excited to seek the Lord with unfeigned sincerity and devotedness of heart: and persons of such a character shall not be left to perish, or to "grope in the dark without light." He, whom they serve, will look upon them with gracious regard, compassionate their ignorance, and raise up some instrument or other for their further instruction and advancement. The desires, which He hath implanted, are pleasing to him; and, though they meet with impediments, they shall not be disappointed.

On a certain day, while the pious Centurion was waiting before God with peculiar solemnity, in fasting and prayer, an Angel appeared to assure him of the favourable notice of Heaven. Cornelius began to tremble, upon seeing the bright form stand before him, and hearing himself summoned by name. The celestial messenger, however, encouraged him by an explicit declaration, that his acts both of devotion and benevolence were recorded in the divine remembrance, and considered as a decided mark of his sincerity.

This circumstance has been thought to countenance the doctrine of human merit. We allow, that it furnishes a powerful inducement to abound in works of piety and mercy, and we would inculcate the performance of them by every scriptural argument.

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If they are done from truly spiritual motives, they shall not be forgotten before God. But they will not entitle us to the glories of heaven, or procure the remission of our sins. It seems an egregious absurdity, to appeal to the new testament in support of such a scheme, as would render the whole system of the Gospel needless and inconsistent. According to that supposition, Cornelius was completely justified by his own obedience; and faith in the Son of God was, to him at least, perfectly unnecessary. Yet it appears from the history, that he was directed by the Angel to send for the Apostle Peter, for the express purpose of being instructed in those principles, “whereby he and all his house should be saved*.” This account, surely, does not favour the presumptuous notion of claiming the divine regard as a matter of debt; for it represents the redemption of Christ as indispensably requisite for persons of the most amiable character.

The Angel himself did not explain or declare the nature of salvation. That honour was reserved for one of our fallen race. The Lord has not “committed the word of reconciliation” to those holy spirits, who, as they are not subject to our temptations and infirmities, could not address us, perhaps, with proper feeling and compassion. But it is intrusted to them, who stand as much in need of pardoning and sanctifying grace as any of their hearers, and are therefore better qualified to enter into their cases with tenderness, and accommodate themselves

* Acts xi. 14.

to their distresses. Those, however, who would preach Christ with good effect, should be truly acquainted with him, and be able to testify his power and mercy from their own experience. Otherwise, they will, probably, deliver the declarations of the Gospel with as much indifference, as if these were not to be depended on, or were of no importance. But, being enriched with all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus, they will, with a peculiar fervour, commend him, who is the object of their warmest affections, to the notice and acceptance of others. The sacred ministry is of divine institution, and is designed to accomplish, even by weak instruments, the most glorious purposes. It pleases God by this his appointed ordinance to awaken the careless, to instruct the ignorant, to subdue the rebellious to obedience, to produce and increase in his people repentance, faith, hope, love, and joy, through the influence of his Spirit. Let us learn to venerate the function, which He hath so highly honoured, and expect from it the most solid advantages, while we read, that an Angel referred the Centurion to St. Peter, to be taught the way of salvation.

Cornelius instantly complied with the heavenly mandate. Having called some of his pious attendants, (for such he had engaged in his service) he related the extraordinary vision, and sent them to invite the Apostle to his house. So prejudiced was Peter against the uncircumcised Gentiles, that he would have revolted at the proposal, had not the Lord prepared his mind, and overcome his objections in such a manner,

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as to furnish a sufficient vindication of his conduct even before others. He saw in a trance a miraculous and emblematical representation, by which he learnt, that the ceremonial distinctions of clean and unclean were designed to be abolished, and that he ought not to retain any exceptions against those, whom God was pleased to receive and sanctify. This occurred just before the messengers arrived; and he was then directed by an immediate impulse of the Spirit, to accompany them without hesitation.

In the mean time, such was the meek and teachable disposition of the Centurion, and such his earnest desire to know the way of God more perfectly, that he waited with much anxiety for the coming of his illustrious teacher. He had also collected his relatives and intimate acquaintance, (with whom, it should seem, he improved his influence for the best purposes) that they might share the blessing of Peter's instructions. This circumstance reminds us of what we owe to our near connections in life. We profess affection, and a readiness to serve them: but how should our friendship appear? Should we not be most solicitous to promote their spiritual and everlasting welfare? For that end, we should endeavour to bring them under the ministry of the Gospel, if we know its value, and expect any advantage from it for ourselves. But, while we feel no such concern, and say as Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" we prove that we are destitute of true benevolence, and ignorant of the unspeakable worth of salvation.

Upon the Apostle's entering the house, Cornelius

met him, and by the lowest prostration testified his reverence for the person, who came with an express commission to declare the counsel of God. Peter, however, refused the homage, as unsuitable to a mere human being, and then enquired for what purposes they had requested his attendance. The Centurion, in reply, related with great simplicity the directions he had received from heaven, adding, "Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God."

How solemn the occasion! And how amiable the disposition of the pious soldier! He considered himself in the presence of God, and felt an earnest desire to know and do his will, while he stood as an humble scholar to listen to the instructions of the inspired preacher. How much more promising would appearances be among ourselves, if all our congregations, assembled for public worship, possessed the same temper, when the ministers of Christ stand forth to declare the truth! Is it not allowed to be our bounden duty, to yield an unfeigned regard and unreserved subjection to the revealed word of God, however opposite it may be to our former notions? But with what contemptuous indifference do many sit in our churches! With what pride and petulance do some cavil at every doctrine, which suits not their preconceived systems! With what a rebellious obstinacy do others reject those holy precepts, which require their carnal affections to be subdued! Few, therefore, are truly solicitous, like Cornelius, to learn and obey the whole will of God.

St. Peter addressed his attentive audience with solemnity and earnestness. He observed, the present occasion had convinced him, that the blessings of the Gospel were not designed to be limited to any people; that according to this gracious dispensation, as none could obtain favour for any external distinctions or advantages, so none would be excluded from mercy for the want of them; and that, without exception of rank or nation, the Lord receives all those, who possess a reverential regard to his majesty, and render unfeigned submission to all his righteous commands. But, lest their imperfect obedience should be considered as the ground of their acceptance, he stated, in a clear and decided manner, the appointed method of justification through the Lord Jesus Christ. The character of the Saviour, his person, work, and offices, his life, death, and resurrection, his coming to judgment, and the attestation of all the prophetic writings to the free forgiveness of sins through faith in his name;—these were the grand topics, on which the Apostle insisted. These, also, are the subjects, which, above all others, are necessary to be understood and kept in our view; and to an honest declaration of them, in every age of the Church, the divine blessing is promised.

Cornelius and his company listened with fixed attention; and, while they gladly received the record, which God gave of his Son, the Holy Ghost descended, probably with some external manifestations of his power, confirmed the truth of the word, and accompanied it with an efficacious influence to the hearers.

They were endued with such miraculous powers, as might qualify them to be witnesses and preachers of the Gospel. They spake in languages, which they had never learned, and with ardent gratitude proclaimed the sovereign and distinguishing mercy of the Lord. When He had thus evidently accepted them, his people could not refuse to admit them into their communion. They were all, therefore, taken into the society of believers, by the initiating rite of baptism: they made an open profession of attachment to Christ, and solemnly dedicated themselves to his service. Nothing more is related concerning them, but that they requested the continuance of Peter a few days longer, being desirous to enjoy some further benefit from his ministry, to be established, edified, and comforted in their holy faith. Those, who know the worth of the Gospel, will esteem and solicit the company and conversation of such, as are more advanced in grace, and are able to communicate the most salutary instructions. But, when connections of this sort are disregarded, it is obvious, that the truth and ways of God are not properly esteemed.

Probably, the Centurion retained his situation in the Roman army: at least, he was not commanded to relinquish it; nor is the occupation of a soldier anywhere condemned in the scriptures, as absolutely sinful in itself. It was, indeed, unfavourable to pure religion, yet perhaps it furnished him with opportunities of doing extensive good. The Apostolical direction is, "Let every man wherein he is called, therein abide with God*."

* 1 Cor. vii. 24.

It is possible, that a good conscience may require us to abandon our post: but let us not quit it, merely to avoid difficulties. Rather, let us enquire, if, by a faithful and honourable discharge of our duty, we may not glorify God and benefit our fellow-creatures. We may expect peculiar support in the place, to which we are appointed; and, perhaps, we are not qualified for any other.

Whatever we may be disposed to think of the state of Cornelius towards God, before his extraordinary call, it is evident that the scriptures describe this call as a dispensation of peculiar mercy, from which both he and others received singular advantages. If he had previously obtained acceptance, he was then taught that he owed it entirely to the interposition of the Lord Jesus Christ: and, doubtless, the clear discovery of redemption tended to fill his soul with peace and joy, and to excite him to higher degrees of holiness. Nothing, therefore, can be concluded from the case before us to the disparagement of the Gospel: nay, rather, we may here perceive the blessed fruits of the Saviour's mediation, and in this view should say with the Apostles, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life *," and "purified their hearts by faith †." May we be encouraged to seek for a participation of the same grace!

A public testimony was now given, that in the Church of Christ the distinctions between Jew and Greek, bond and free, male and female, are done away, and that believers "are all one in Christ Je-

* Acts xi. 18.

† xv. 9.

fus *." And "if we be Christ's," it matters not from what parentage we are descended, "we are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." The door of mercy continues open, and we are authorized to exhort all, without respect of persons, that they earnestly solicit an admission. The same blessing, which Peter proposed to Cornelius, is still offered to us: it is our's, also, to hear of remission of sins through faith in the Son of God. It is generally allowed, that notorious offenders stand in need of it; nor should we hesitate to tender it in the fullest manner to the most abandoned. But some appear to reject it with disdain, as if, on account of their amiable temper and moral character, it were unnecessary for them to seek redemption through the blood of the cross. Alas! they deceive themselves. If they be as exemplary as Cornelius, which perhaps may be doubted, yet this case will teach them to place a high value upon the salvation, exhibited in the Gospel, and will condemn their proud contempt of this mercy.

To men of all characters the good tidings are addressed. The Lord Christ is preached unto us for the forgiveness of sins. Is not this the blessing, which is indispensably requisite? Then let us obey the great evangelical precept, without cavilling, and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, as having made peace for us. So will the word of God come unto us, as it did to Cornelius, "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." The Holy Ghost is not now communicated in those extraordinary operations, which were

* Gal. iii. 28, 29.

once expedient; but he descends, as certainly as he did in the primitive ages, on all who cordially accept the message of grace. He enlightens, sanctifies, and comforts them, and thus gives them an unquestionable evidence, that they have not "believed a lie." Let us look up in fervent prayer for this efficacious influence, that he may accomplish in us "all the good pleasure of his goodness." Then, like the devout Centurion, we shall shout aloud for joy, whilst we magnify God for his mercy, and celebrate the praises of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

HEROD AGRIPPA,

· · CHAP. XI.

Herod persecuted the Church—killed James—imprisoned Peter—was disappointed by that Apostle's miraculous escape—flattered, as if he were a deity—suddenly destroyed for his pride.

THE faithful followers of Christ, though called to maintain a severe warfare against an evil world, are not every moment engaged in actual conflict. For gracious purposes they may be at certain times exempted from all external disturbances, and permitted to enjoy a state of ease and prosperity. "The Lord maketh even their enemies to be at peace with them *." Such a season occurred after the conversion of St. Paul. Perhaps some of the violent opposers of the Gospel were discouraged, when they saw so bold a champion desert them. "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria, and were edified, and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied †." At length, however, a furious persecutor arose, and threatened them with terrible devastation. The result, indeed, was, that he was suddenly cut down by the

* Prov. xvi. 7.

† Acts ix. 31.

hand of God, whom he had provoked, yet for a while he was suffered to shew the malignity of his heart, for the vindication of the stroke of the Avenger.

The contemplation of such characters may excite many painful sensations, but suggests profitable reflections. We shall here perceive, that our depraved nature is filled with enmity against God and his people, that the fiercest adversaries of the truth are not to be dreaded or envied, in the height of all their pomp and power, and that their triumphing is short. We shall learn, also, from the instance before us, to fear before that holy Lord God, who is jealous of his honour, and whose anger is tremendous, when he ariseth to take vengeance.

The person, now introduced to our notice, is Herod surnamed Agrippa, grandson of that Herod, who massacred the children at Bethlehem, nephew to him who murdered John the Baptist, and the father of that prince who was "almost persuaded to be a Christian." He was the king of Judæa, which he governed as a Roman province. He is said to have been zealous for the religion of the Jews: but, perhaps, he professed it only with the view of conciliating their favour; at least, he shewed in his general conduct a fondness for popularity. His avowed opposition to the Gospel may in some degree be ascribed to that principle, whilst it is obvious from the haughtiness of spirit, which he possessed, that he must himself have been totally averse to the humbling doctrines of our religion.

"Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex
certain

certain of the Church *." We lament, that power should ever be exercised for such purposes; and that they, who are appointed "for the punishment of evil doers," should exert their authority to harass and destroy them that do well. The flock of Christ was the object of this tyrant's indignation: he regarded not their inoffensive and benevolent disposition, but like a ravenous wolf sought to scatter and devour them; and they, like defenceless sheep, were obliged to fly, or were doomed to the slaughter. They were afflicted in different ways, not by reproach and contempt alone, or by the deprivation of their worldly substance, but by imprisonment, tortures, and death. It should seem, that their religion was their only offence, and the true cause of that malignity, with which they were treated. Christians may be guilty of imprudence and misconduct: but it is their attachment to their divine Master, which principally excites persecution against them. Thus Jesus declared; "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you †."

Probably, many persons in a private situation fell under Herod's resentment; but, these were not of consequence enough to satiate his fury. He turned his hand against some of the leading characters in the Church, and, of course, the Apostles were first marked out for destruction. James, the brother of John, was seized and slain with the sword: thus he, who had been so dear to Jesus, soon finished his labours,

* Acts xii. 1, &c.

† John xv. 19.

and, the first of the twelve, received the crown of martyrdom. The loss of so valuable a life, when Christianity stood in need of every support, was an afflicting dispensation. But, perhaps, the violence and cruelty of the oppressor, instead of checking, promoted the progress of the Gospel. Did it not appear more glorious, through St. James's readiness to suffer in its defence, and through the subsequent perseverance of his associates in the ministry, who continued to despise the menaces of their enraged persecutors? The Jews, however, felt themselves gratified by the king's sanguinary conduct, and, probably, flattered him for the fervour of his religious zeal. With a view, therefore, to recommend himself and his administration, he proceeded to further acts of severity against the Christians. Alas! to what lengths of folly and wickedness have men been hurried by a fondness for vain applause! Let us beware of indulging a passion, which is of so destructive a tendency.

The assiduous and unwearied exertions of St. Peter in propagating the truth rendered him particularly obnoxious. Accordingly, the tyrant marked him out for the next victim, apprehended and imprisoned him. It was intended that his death should be a public exhibition, as a sight which would afford peculiar pleasure to the people. But the celebration of the passover interfered with the execution. These murderers were exact in their ceremonial observances, like the murderers of Jesus, who, while they contrived his crucifixion, paid a scrupulous attention to the holy feast. It was decreed, therefore, that the

Apostle

Apostle should be brought forth to suffer, at the conclusion of the solemnity.' But his hour was not then come. Whatever our enemies may threaten, we possess an infallible security under the care and protection of our Almighty Lord, so long as he shall please to employ us in his service, or retain us in our appointed post. 'Let us leave to him the determination of every event, and be solicitous, not so much to escape the hand of violence, as to answer some useful purpose, "whether it be by life or by death."

Herod, determined to make sure of his prisoner, not only kept him in close confinement, but committed him to the custody of four quaternions of soldiers, lest a rescue or an escape should be attempted. But no strength or contrivance can prevail against the counsel of the Lord. If He should say, "Go forth," no gates or chains, nor even all the armed force of the most potent monarch, can hold one weak, defenceless saint in bondage. The incessant prayers of the Church, which were offered up for the Apostle, procured the divine interposition for his release, and effectually defeated the king's intention. "The Lord sent his Angel, and delivered Peter out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the Jews." Yet his miraculous preservation was delayed till within a few hours of the time appointed for his execution. On this account it was the more conspicuous, and calculated to recommend the Gospel to the favourable notice, at least to restrain the fury, of its adversaries. God, as it were, publicly declared the cause of the prisoner to be his own, and
all,

all, who paid any serious attention to that testimony, must have perceived that opposition was vain, foolish, and wicked. Who shall presume to fight against Him?

"The multitude were disappointed of the entertainment, which had been promised them in the tortures and death of the Apostle. The bloody persecutor commanded diligent search to be made for his intended victim; but Peter was secured from his rage: the Lord concealed him, as he had done Baruch and Jeremiah on a similar occasion*. Thus the pride of the tyrant was mortified, when he found himself robbed of his prey; but his heart refused to be humbled. He ought to have confessed his own iniquity, for having designed to take away an innocent life. But alas! in what numerous instances are we constrained to remark the blindness and obduracy of men in a state of impenitence! "Lord, when thy hand is lifted up, they will not see;" they will not believe or regard the manifest interpositions of Heaven: but the time is coming, when "they shall see, and be ashamed for their envy at the people †." Whatever might be Herod's view of the matter, he doubtless wished to discredit the miracle, and prevent its influence upon the public mind. He slew the guards, to whose care Peter was committed, that the escape of the prisoner might be ascribed to their negligence. It has been a common device with the enemies of Christianity to spread false reports, and give a wrong statement of real facts, in order

* Jer. xxxvi. 26.

† Isa. xxvi. 11.

to prejudice others, and obviate the probable effect of the truth. We should therefore be afraid of listening to any misrepresentations of the religion of the Gospel. Let us examine with strict impartiality, and judge with the most serious deliberation. Shall we not be inexcusable, if through inattention we suffer ourselves to be imposed on, and tricked out of our salvation, “by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness; whereby they lie in wait to deceive *?”

Perhaps, Herod declined all further persecution of the Church: but the cries of them, whom he had oppressed, “entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth.” The blood, which he had shed, and that also, which he had designed to shed, demanded vengeance against him. Yet he was spared for some time. God is patient and exerciseth much forbearance towards his enemies. Why else is not the common course of events obstructed, and the world itself destroyed? Considering the daring provocations of his creatures, we may wonder, that He doth not make bare his arm, and consume them in his anger. But his justice will strike at the last. “If the wicked turn not, He will whet his sword; he hath bent his bow, and made it ready. He hath also prepared for him the instruments of death; he ordaineth his arrows against the persecutors †.”

Herod removed from Jerusalem to Cesarea, to celebrate certain games, as Josephus reports, in honour of the Roman Emperor. Here we shall behold him, at one moment in a state of high dignity and glory,

* Eph. iv. 14.

† Psal. vii. 12, 13.

at another debased even to the dust. During his residence at Cefarea, the Tyrians and Sidonians, whom he had threatened with war for some offence, sent a deputation to him, professing submission, and deprecating his anger. Through the influence of the king's chamberlain, they obtained the desired reconciliation; and the plan of hostilities was relinquished. But Herod, for the gratification of his own excessive vanity by a pompous display of his greatness, gave a public audience to the ambassadors, and endeavoured to impress them with an idea of his abilities, magnificence, and power. He had provided for the purpose a splendid robe of richest texture, which, according to Josephus, was so exquisitely wrought with silver, that, when the sun shone upon it, the eyes of spectators were dazzled. Thus arrayed, he entered the crowded theatre, and seated himself upon a throne of state, desirous to attract the general notice, admiration, and applause.

He exhibited all the grandeur of his majesty, and it should seem that he was also ostentatious of his eloquence. He addressed the assembly in a speech prepared for the occasion; the purport of which was, most probably, to celebrate his own power and clemency before the gazing multitude. They were not backward to pay him the deference he wished for. They might be struck with a pleasing astonishment, or, perceiving his design, were disposed to gratify his pride by expressions of gross adulation. They gave a shout, declaring their high admiration; and, as if they were ready to exalt him above the
rank

rank of mortals, by giving him divine honours, they cried out, "It is the voice of a god, and not of a man." This was profane language indeed, and the more so, as many of the company had been instructed to worship none but Jehovah. The king himself was sufficiently acquainted with the sacred scriptures, to be convinced that such adoration was impious in the extreme, and he ought to have rejected it with abhorrence. But he was evidently delighted, and, being elated with vanity, consented to receive that homage, which should be paid only to our Almighty Creator. "He gave not God the glory:" he did not refer the people to Him, and, as if he forgot his own entire dependence, acknowledged not his obligations to the sovereign Lord of all, for the distinguished eminence, to which he was raised.

Such was Herod; set up as something more than human, revered as a deity by flattering parasites, and foolish enough to be pleased with their idolatrous oblations of praise. The absurdity as well as wickedness of the king in this transaction may surprise us; but we shall cease to wonder, if we seriously attend to the state of our fallen nature. Pride is most unsuitable to us, as creatures and sinners; yet, though "not made for men," it is interwoven in our very frame. We are not unwilling to be extolled for excellencies which we do not possess; we wish to renounce our subjection to Him who made us, and claim a consequence and respect, which are due only to Divinity itself. There are peculiar snares and dangers attendant on persons in an elevated rank: they are
more

more especially liable to be puffed up with a conceit of their own importance. "Man, being in honour," not only "abideth not," but "is like the beasts that perish *." Such a situation too often stupifies the mind, and renders it incapable of proper discernment; and then he, who is the object of general admiration and applause, is not himself, and cannot make a fair estimate of things. Or, like the brute animals, he is engrossed with such matters, as are immediately within his view, to the neglect and contempt of such as are remote. Accordingly, the history of mankind will furnish many instances of those, who, having risen to great power, claimed and received titles and professions of homage, which are the unalienable and exclusive right of the Lord Almighty. Let none among ourselves presume, that we, if placed in eminent stations, should be secure from such effects. Let us all, rather, suspect our own hearts, and pray earnestly, that God may subdue our natural vanity, and keep us humble under a sense of our insignificance, weakness, and depravity.

An exemplary punishment was inflicted on the haughty king. In the midst of all his splendour, while he was elated with the notion of his own superior excellence, as if he were a god, he felt a mortifying conviction, and exhibited a melancholy proof, of his helplessness and mortality. He was instantly seized with excruciating pains, forced to confess his folly and wretchedness to his idolatrous admirers, and, after

* Psal. xlix. 12.

a few days of extreme suffering, became a loathsome corpse. Many learned solutions, probably, may be given, and physical reasons assigned for his extraordinary death. But St. Luke, the sacred historian, though himself a physician, ascribes it solely to the immediate vengeance of Heaven: "the Angel of the Lord smote him." We ask not for any other explanation; and we lament that so many seem determined to ascribe every event to natural principles and second causes, unwilling to acknowledge the first great cause of all, or to allow the God of nature any influence in the government of the universe.

The visitation of God in this case was the more remarkable, as it followed immediately upon the sin, which had provoked his anger. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily: therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil*." But here justice overtook the offender with swift steps, and exhibited him to public view, even in the moment of his highest exaltation and triumph, as a signal instance of the divine vengeance against pride and persecution. Thus, while Nebuchadnezzar boastingly exclaimed, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom, by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?" there fell a voice from heaven, saying, "The kingdom is departed from thee†." Belshazzar, also, in the very act of "lifting up himself against the Lord of heaven," was confounded by the

* Eccles. viii. 11.

† Dan. iv. 30, 31.

handwriting, which declared, that, being weighed in the balances and found wanting, he should soon be deprived of his dominion *.

The particular nature of Herod's punishment seems designed to shew the odiousness of his sin. He was presumptuously elated, and therefore God determined to reduce him to the lowest state of abasement. As he received with complacency the impious adulations of the people, and probably indulged the conceit, that he was advanced above the lot of humanity, he became a weak and defenceless prey to the meanest and most loathsome vermin. "He was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost." Bred in the putrefaction, which seized his frame, they suddenly attacked his vitals, and rendered him an object of misery and abhorrence. Who could then envy or admire his splendour and greatness? Who could any longer bow the knee to worship him? He cried out in the anguish of his heart; his pampered body was soon turned into corruption; and all his pomp and dignity were laid in the dust.

"Lord, what is man!" "Verily, at his best estate, he is altogether vanity †." His mental faculties, glorious and excellent as they are, afford no ground for boasting, since in a moment they may be impaired or deranged. His outward form may be comely, but it is a short-lived flower, and may be instantly blasted in the height of its gaiety. "When thou, Lord, with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth :

* Dan. v. 21—28.

† Psal. cxliv. 3. xxxix. 5.

surely every man is vanity *." Let those, who pride themselves in a vigorous constitution, a graceful person, or an eloquent address, contemplate the case of Herod, and be ashamed of their foolish ostentation. Can you bear to be told, that not only shall worms devour your flesh in the grave, but possibly those loathsome creatures may receive a commission against you, and render you, in your most prosperous state upon earth, a terror to yourselves and others? O seek for something better, than any of those decorations or accomplishments, of which you may be so soon deprived! The grace of Jesus is a sure and never-failing treasure to the sincere believer. O labour to obtain the "one thing needful!" It is "that good part, which shall not be taken away †."

This history will teach us to be thankful for the outward peace and security, which the Church of Christ, established among us, now enjoys. The religious privileges, afforded us in this country, are singularly great. Let us praise God, that we are the subjects, not of a furious and persecuting tyrant, but of "a nursing-father" to our Zion. Let us give diligence to improve our inestimable advantages to good purpose, and be afraid lest our negligence or discontent should provoke God to withdraw them.

Yet those, who "suffer for righteousness' sake," have no real cause to dread their most violent and powerful opposers. The strength of your enemies, when exerted against the cause of God, is feeble and contemptible. While we refer you to Herod, we ask, "Who art

* Psal. xxxix. 11.

† Luke x. 42.

thou,

thou, that thou shouldst be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man, which shall be made as grass?—and hast feared continually every day because of the fury of the oppressor, as if he were ready to destroy? And where is the fury of the oppressor * ?” The Lord will surely maintain his own truth; and perhaps the persecution, which appears most formidable, may eventually promote its advancement. Herod, who “stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the Church,” was cut down; “but the word of God grew and multiplied.” O learn to trust your concerns with your faithful and Almighty Protector! “Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee †.” “No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue, that shall rise against thee in judgment, thou shalt condemn ‡.”

From the character and tremendous punishment of Herod, a suitable occasion is given, to warn others of his spirit and conduct. Many in private life are disposed to deride and oppress those, who appear zealous for the faith and practice of the Gospel. We would argue with them concerning the unreasonableness and danger of their opposition, and ask, Who are you, that you should wish to direct another man's conscience? Whatever influence or authority you possess, presume not to set yourselves up in the place of the supreme Judge, or to usurp dominion “over God's heritage.” Your persecution is as foolish, as it is base. It may, probably, deter hypo-

* Isa. li. 12, 13.

† xii. 6.

‡ liv. 17.

crites, but it will render sincere believers more firm and courageous in their profession. They, who truly understand the worth of Christ and his salvation, will not desert his service on account of the difficulties, which you may throw in their way. Yet, while you are endeavouring to keep men in ignorance and sin, the tendency of your conduct is to deceive and ruin their immortal souls: and in this view you must be ranked amongst robbers and assassins of the most heinous kind. If you consider likewise, that your opposition is in fact levelled against God himself, your guilt will appear peculiarly enormous. You exert your influence to prevent a due subjection to his authority, and therefore you are promoting rebellion in his government. And do you not tremble for the consequence? He will assuredly reckon with you for your profane derision of his word, and injurious treatment of his people. Perhaps, you may be made, like Herod, a monument of vengeance: for we have heard of many similar cases. At least, the time is coming, when, if you repent not, Jehovah "will speak unto you in his wrath, and vex you in his sore displeasure *."

We caution our readers, also, to beware of that haughtiness of spirit, which the king of Judea betrayed. "God resisteth the proud," and determines that "they shall be abased." Yet are we not all, in one respect or another, chargeable with this sin? Has it not been our aim and study to display ourselves, our abilities, possessions, or performances, in an ostenta-

* Psal. ii, 5.

tious manner? Have we not claimed the credit, and refused to "give God the glory?" There is no superiority, mental or corporeal, which we can enjoy, but pride will find in it occasion of boasting and triumph. We are continually in danger of exalting the creature to the neglect of the Creator. O let us look with a holy jealousy on our most admired advantages; for, whatever they may be, if God be not acknowledged and served in them, they will prove the means of aggravated guilt and everlasting destruction!

How many are cut down, like Herod, in the midst of their vanity and profaneness! Do not the frequent instances of the sudden deaths of profligate offenders excite an alarm amongst us? We entreat the attention of the careless and impenitent to this tremendous subject. Any other sin, as well as those which appeared in the character before us, will, if persisted in, expose you to the fierce anger of Almighty God. His hand is lifted up; and, perhaps, he may shortly strike the fatal blow. What, then, is your hope, "when God taketh away your soul*?" Ah! "where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear†?" The acute disease, by which Herod perished, was only an omen and warning of that infinitely more terrible misery, which awaited him. "He was eaten of worms:" but there is a worm, "which dieth not," and which will be for ever gnawing the consciences of them "that obey not the Gospel of God." Is not this more than you can bear to think of? Yet remember, it is decreed, that

* Job xxvii. 8.

† 1 Pet. iv. 18.

“ though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished *.” And, perhaps, the irrevocable sentence may instantly go forth, “ This night thy soul shall be required of thee †.” O seek forgiveness by the blood of the cross! Seek the renovation of your hearts in righteousness, by the grace of the Spirit! “ To day, if ye will hear the voice of God, harden not your hearts ‡.” Submit to him without reserve, and you shall know, that He, who is terrible in his anger, “ delighteth in mercy. He will subdue your iniquities, and cast all your sins into the depths of the sea §.”

* Prov. xi. 21.

† Luke xii. 20.

‡ Heb. iv. 7.

§ Mic. vii. 18, 19.

ONESIMUS.:

CHAP. XII.

Onesimus, the servant of Philemon—robbed his master—fled to Rome—there converted through St. Paul's ministry—returned to his master with the Apostle's recommendation—was affectionately received by the Church as a brother—and probably admitted into the sacred ministry.

WHILE we are considering the characters of men, we ought to perceive and admire the glory and perfections of God in his conduct towards them. The government, which He exercises over our fallen race, exhibits an astonishing view of his love, no less than of his power. Such a view is given us in every instance of the conversion of a sinner. Cases of this nature are always to be regarded as events of peculiar magnitude. They discover the exceeding greatness of that grace, which can pardon and sanctify the rebellious; and therefore, as far as they are made known to us, demand our serious attention.

The person, who is here proposed as the subject of our meditations, claims our notice on this ground. The sacred volume, indeed, does not contain a large account; but the few circumstances, recorded of him, will

will furnish us with important instruction. He had been placed in a mean situation, and his conduct had been infamous; but, the doctrine of the cross having reached his heart with a mighty energy, he became an honourable and useful member both of society and of the Church of God. May we, like the holy Angels, rejoice over the repenting sinner! May we contemplate the change with gratitude and delight, and prove by our future obedience, that we have obtained the same mercy!

Onesimus was no more than a common slave, but probably did not feel the hardships, generally attendant on such a condition; and he was favoured with opportunities of gaining religious knowledge and improvement. His master Philemon professed and adorned the Gospel, having a church in his house, and being distinguished for his "love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and toward all saints." It should seem, also, that he was a faithful preacher, for St. Paul addresses him as his "dearly beloved and fellow labourer *." The meanest servant, in such a pious family, doubtless enjoyed peculiar advantages of a spiritual kind. But no external means can change the heart. Onesimus retained his situation without any apparent benefit from the prayers, instructions, admonitions, or example of his excellent master; and on this account his guilt was more highly aggravated. To continue careless and impenitent, under the constant observation of the efficacious and happy influence of real religion,

* Philem. 1, &c.

manifests the deepest depravity: it implies more than gross ignorance, an avowed contempt and rejection of God and his truth.

O consider, if you are the members of such an household, as that of Philemon, What improvement are you making of the valuable opportunities afforded you? Have you not yet to learn the way of righteousness, though you have long been taught? Do you not neglect your souls, though continually warned of your danger? You are summoned to the worship of God, both at Church and at home: but do you not still remain strangers to prayer? What account, then, shall you be able to give? Should you die in unbelief, your masters and parents, whose exhortations you have despised, will witness against you: and that situation, which might have proved an inestimable blessing, will eventually be your heaviest curse.

Onesimus was not merely thoughtless, but destitute of all principles of probity. He betrayed his trust in Philemon's service, and then absconded with the pilfered property. Is the heinousness of dishonesty sufficiently considered? Are you, to whom the concerns of others are committed, strictly attentive to your obligations? Do you hate robbery, even in the smallest degree? And are all your transactions such, as you could bear to produce to the public view? O remember, there is a God in heaven, who narrowly inspects your private dealings, and will expose every fraudulent practice at the day of judgment: Will not this be to your unspeakable confusion? Determine, then, to suffer any difficulties, rather than waste or embezzle what is deposited

deposited with you. Let "no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such *."

From this view of Onesimus's state and conduct we should have apprehended every thing bad: and had he received the just recompense of his iniquity, or been left to follow, without restraint, the devices of his own heart, the consequence must have been fatal. But a different scene opens upon us; and we turn from the profligacy of the sinner, to behold the rich and sovereign grace of our God in Jesus Christ.

Onesimus, having basely deserted his master, probably became a wanderer and a vagabond. In that state, under the controlling influence of divine Providence, his steps were directed to Rome; and there, by some means or other, he was brought under the ministry of St. Paul, who, though a prisoner, was permitted to preach the Gospel in his own house. What were Onesimus's motives for attending the Apostle, we know not; but the event was blessed. The wretched rambler was suddenly arrested; an arrow of conviction from the Lord pierced his heart; he confessed his guilt, and obtained mercy through that Saviour, of whom he then heard. A total renovation took place within him: he "renounced the hidden things of dishonesty," and desired to serve God in righteousness and true holiness. He was more than reformed; he was made "a new creature." This, said Paul, is "my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds."

Here, then, is a striking instance, and undeniable

* 1 Thess. iv. 6.

proof, of the extensiveness and power of that grace, which God has exhibited, in the Gospel. He can save those, whose cases to us appear desperate. He can pardon the most aggravated sins, and wash away stains of the deepest die. He can turn the most obdurate rebel into a faithful subject. Accumulated offences, and confirmed habits of wickedness, are no obstruction to the exercise of his mercy and the influence of his Spirit, on those, whom He is pleased to visit with his salvation. On this ground, we may be encouraged to entertain a pleasing hope for others, and to offer importunate supplications for ourselves.

Some are disposed to ask, Why does the Lord permit the objects of his choice to proceed so far and continue so long in their evil courses? Why does he not prevent the mischief, which they bring upon themselves and their connections? "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God*?" Instead of giving way to curious enquiries and presumptuous cavillings concerning his dispensations, we should rather bow before him with unfeigned humility, and confess that we have no right to question the wisdom or the equity of his proceedings. Many of his reasons are concealed from us; but that part of his conduct, which he has condescended to explain, demands our admiration, love, and praise; and, even when his appointments appear to us strange and unaccountable, we should rest assured, that He doeth all things well. At the last day, it will be incontestably demonstrated, that

* Rom. ix. 20.

“ the Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works *.”

We grant that He suffers men, for whom he has “ thoughts of peace and not of evil,” to gratify their own perverse desires, and make a daring progress in wickedness. Thus he takes occasion to humble them more effectually, after they have given full proof of their depravity by their atrocious conduct. He exhibits in a more conspicuous light the sovereignty of his mercy, while he convinces them by their own experience, that they deserve to perish, even as others, and that they are indebted to his Almighty grace for the salutary change, which is produced. It is observable, too, that persons of this description, when they have embraced the Gospel, generally possess a stronger and livelier sense of the value of redemption, and their obligations to the Saviour, than those who have not run into the same irregularities. They feel the more fervent love, as being more deeply impressed with the persuasion, that they have much forgiven †. Are there not evident marks of the divine wisdom and goodness in this procedure? We confess, however, that the subject involves difficulties, which we pretend not to explain; and we caution our readers to suspect their own reasonings and conclusions, which are not expressly warranted by the scriptures. While we maintain and rejoice in the full liberty of the Gospel, let us beware of abusing it to the purposes of licentiousness. “ Where sin abounded, grace did much more

* Psal. cxlv. 17.

† Lu. vii. 47.

abound.

abound,—What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid*.” We reject such an inference with abhorrence.

It is the high prerogative of Him, “who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will †,” to bring good out of evil, and to glorify himself even by the disobedience of his creatures: yet this does not in any measure palliate their guilt. The wickedness of Joseph’s brethren, in conspiring against him and selling him into Egypt, was eventually the means of great and numerous advantages, and designed to be so by the divine appointment. But, as they acted from the basest motives, they were perfectly inexcusable. “Ye thought evil against me,” said Joseph, “but God meant it unto good ‡.” It pleased the Lord, likewise, to render the dishonesty of Onesimus, though truly detestable, subservient to the most gracious purposes. This, at least, led the way to his conversion; and who shall say, that it was not permitted, in order to fix upon his heart a deep conviction of his depravity? What else could be the sense of the Apostle, when he observed to Philemon, “Perhaps, he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldst receive him for ever?” This gives us an astonishing view of the dispensations of God. He preserves his own holiness; and yet, the very sins, which are most hateful to him, form a part of his plan, inasmuch as he intends to make use of them, in various instances, for the recovery of the offenders. They follow their own perverse inclinations, whilst he secretly conducts them to

* Rom. v. 20. vi. 1, 2. † Eph. i. 11. ‡ Gen. l. 20.

those

those places and connections, in which a blessing awaits them. These cases frequently occur; but many of them, at present, may be wisely concealed from public view, since men of corrupt minds would thence take occasion to blaspheme the truth, and harden themselves in their iniquity. But hereafter they will all be displayed, and furnish the redeemed of the Lord with additional reasons for admiring, loving, and praising Him throughout eternity.

Such also is the sovereign Providence of God, that he can never be at a loss for means to accomplish his own purposes. He “waits to be gracious,” and sends repeated calls and offers of mercy to those, who persist in their rebellion. Yet he is not, he cannot be, disappointed: if one method fails for reducing them to obedience, another is at hand. Onesimus fled from the admonitions of his pious master, but in his flight, though this was no part of his intention, he came under the ministry of St. Paul, and there received the blessing of a new heart. The Lord God, though not confined in his agency, generally honours the ordinances of his own appointment; and while men seek to evade those exhortations, which are painful to them, he is often pleased to bring them under the sound of his word in a different situation, and to produce in them such a change, as they neither expected nor desired. But, by whatever instrument a spiritual renovation is effected, the whole glory should be ascribed to Him, “who worketh all in all*.”

This is not a subject of mere speculation. Con-

* 1 Cor. xii. 6.

version extends not to the judgment only, but to the inward principles and tempers, and will appear in the outward conduct. In some instances sufficient time may not be allowed, to give a public and decisive proof of its reality. We do not assert, that in these cases there is no evidence to be depended on, but none of that sort, which we are authorized to require as indispensably necessary, where life is spared, and opportunities of doing good are afforded. "This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk *." "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven †."

St. Paul without hesitation pronounced Onesimus a convert; and, doubtless, the change was evinced to his satisfaction. The poor fugitive slave felt a deep conviction of his guilt, and especially of the theft, which he had committed. He opened his distress, and made a frank confession to the Apostle, that through him he might implore forgiveness from his much injured master. Repentance is always accompanied with a painful remembrance of sin, a sense of its evil, and a readiness to acknowledge both to God and men every wrong, which we have done. If the mischief, which we have occasioned, cannot be repaired, yet we should prove our godly sorrow by an honest and unreserved declaration of our baseness. An anxious endeavour to deny or conceal, to justify or palliate our misconduct, will give sufficient ground for suspecting an unsoundness of heart.

* Eph. iv. 17.

† Mat. v. 16.

Onesimus was willing to return to the post, which he had so shamefully deserted, and desirous by a strict attention to his duty to be useful to that honourable person, who had suffered through his former treachery. This was a favourable sign. It ought never to be forgotten, that true religion will direct our regard to the respective places in life, which we have forsaken or neglected, and dispose us to discharge our appointed offices for the benefit of those, to whom we have been injurious. The sincere penitent will enquire, How may I serve and glorify God in my situation? How may I now fulfil those obligations, which I have basely violated in time past? I have wronged and grieved my nearest connections, my parents or master, my children or servants: in what way may I now be enabled to promote their advantage and comfort? But those, who feel no such concern about their future conduct, who are not solicitous to answer some more profitable purpose, than they have already done, know not the grace of God in truth: their religion is vain.

In order to probe the wound more perfectly, we observe, that, if your consciences be distressed by the recollection of any trespass or injury, which you have committed, you must endeavour to make reparation according to the utmost of your ability. If you refuse this, your professions of penitence are hypocritical. Onesimus, probably, could not restore to Philemon what he had stolen; but he acknowledged his obligation to do it. St. Paul admitted the demands of the master, and, taking the obligation of the servant upon himself, expressly confirmed the intentions and the duty
of

of his convert. Thus the Apostle writes, "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account: I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it."

Onesimus, having obtained forgiveness with God, was cordially received by the Church, and from that time held in considerable reputation. St. Paul commends him to the notice of the Colossians, as "a faithful and beloved brother, who was one of them *." And ecclesiastical history relates, that he was afterwards admitted into the sacred ministry, and laboured diligently for the conversion of others. What an astonishing and happy change, then, was here accomplished! How excellent is that system of faith, which is calculated to produce these glorious effects! "Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir-tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle-tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off †." After such a representation, it will not surely be objected, that the doctrines of the Gospel are of a licentious tendency. Through the gracious provision which God has made in Jesus Christ, there is free and plenteous redemption for those, who have been most abandoned in principle and conduct. But, consistently with this truth, we maintain that those, whom the Lord pardons, He also sanctifies, and that believers must prove their sincerity by abounding in all the fruits of righteousness. Do we not, then, effectually secure the interests of morality and holiness? Some, perhaps, object to the kindness and cordia-

* Col. iv. 9.

† Isa. lv. 13.

lity, with which such converts are usually received among Christians: but this very circumstance, which excites disgust, displays the strong influence of our religion. If there is joy in the presence of the Angels of God, over repenting sinners *, shall not the saints on earth participate of the same generous affection and disinterested pleasure? Shall not all, who love the Lord, shew the tenderest regard for those, who are reconciled to him, without exception of rank, or even of their former character? If he vouchsafe to admit them into his family as his sons and daughters, who are we, that we should treat them with contempt or neglect? The grace of God will teach us, that "we were by nature the children of wrath, even as others †," and dispose us to love all those as brethren, who appear to be renewed by the same Spirit. "It is meet that we should make merry and be glad: for this our brother was dead and is alive again; and was lost, and is found ‡."

Paul, though an Apostle, rejoiced over Onesimus, who was no better than a poor slave, and whose conduct had been infamous. He did not urge against him his mean condition, or his atrocious crimes; but, believing him to be born of God, he embraced him as a fellow-heir, earnestly interceded for him with Philemon, and with the overflowings of parental affection exulted in him as his own child. Do we not feel very forcibly our obligations to Christian love, while we observe with what tenderness and fervour St. Paul commends this young convert to the favour-

* Luke xv. 10.

† Eph. ii. 3.

‡ Luke xv. 32.

able notice of his master: "I beseech thee," says he, "for my son Onesimus;—thou therefore receive him, that is mine own bowels;—not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord! If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself." Probably, Philemon complied with the request in its full extent, pardoned the returning slave, treated him with affectionate regard, and rejoiced at the change. Let us likewise learn, to lay aside our envious resentments, and, without adverting to past circumstances, if only we are now united together in the bonds of the Covenant, and "called in one hope of our calling," let us, as brethren of the same father, "love one another with a pure heart fervently."

But, while we contend for the exercise of an enlarged benevolence towards all Christians, we maintain that the Gospel does not reduce the different ranks and orders of society to a level, nay, rather that it requires the observance of those distinctions. Onesimus might possibly resume his post in Philemon's household, and yet be treated on a spiritual account, "not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved." This spiritual regard we may pay to our pious labourers and meanest dependents, as the children of God and the heirs of glory, while we continue to insist on their subjection and obedience. We lament the forwardness of some, who seem to think they are exempted from subordination, in consequence of their religious knowledge and attainments. They obtrude

themselves with a degree of insolence on the notice of their superiors, as if in a civil sense there must be a perfect equality among those, who are one in Christ. Surely this betrays gross misconceptions of our religion, or much haughtiness of temper. "Let as many servants, as are under the yoke, count their own masters worthy of all honour; that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren," (as if they were all on a level), "but rather," remembering the appointments of Providence, "do them service *."

Persons of higher rank should also learn to correct their proud and disdainful behaviour towards their inferiors. They have a right to use their labours; yet they should treat them with all gentleness of manners. These worldly distinctions will soon cease, and only that grand discrimination of characters, which the grace of God produces, will last for ever. If, therefore, we discover the image of the Saviour in them, who are subject to our authority, they should be particularly dear to us for his sake, and we should rejoice over them from the delightful expectation, that we shall meet them in heaven. There Onesimus and Philemon, with their beloved Paul, are worshipping in the same company. There may we also, and our respective families, make up the household of faith, and join in the same acclamations of praise before the throne of God and of the Lamb!

The example before us may encourage the most

* 1 Tim. vi. 1, 2.

atrocious sinners to return to God with the hope of finding mercy; but the subject is shamefully perverted, if it imbolden any to persist in their evil courses. Shall you dare to say, For the present I will give a loose to my heart's desires, but on some future day I will repent, and doubt not of obtaining forgiveness, even as Onesimus? Does the work of conversion lie within your own power? Or can you claim the grace, which alone is able to effect it? Are the instances of such a change, in persons rejecting the Gospel, so numerous, as to warrant your conclusion, that you shall certainly be recovered? On the contrary, do you not see many suddenly taken away in their iniquities; and do not others, who are spared a longer time, become more and more obdurate, till, as we fear, they "fill up their sins," and perish with aggravated ruin for their contempt of salvation? Presume not, then, on distant opportunities, which may never be granted: resist not your present convictions, lest they should return no more. You have trifled too much already: O give the remainder of your short life to Him, for whose service you were made: thankfully accept his offered mercy, and endeavour to improve every succeeding day for his glory!

HOLY ANGELS.

CHAP. XIII.

Angels, their nature, character, and situation— are God's ministers, and perform his purposes—study and admire the plan of redemption—announced the birth of Jesus—worshipped him—attended him—declared his resurrection—rejoice in the conversion of sinners—watch over believers—will accompany Jesus to the last judgment—summon the world—approve and execute, the different sentences—will be for ever employed in praising God—confirmed in their holy and happy state—and united with redeemed saints,

In contemplating the various characters of men, we perceive much cause to mourn for the sad effects, which sin has produced upon the earth. Some of these characters exhibit nothing but evil. Others discover a real excellency of disposition and conduct: but such are their defects, so interrupted their obedience, that even in them the purposes of Heaven seem, as yet, to be imperfectly answered. Our species evidently appears in a fallen state; an extreme depravity universally prevails, which is offensive to God, obscures his glory, and spreads confusion and misery through the whole system of human affairs.

Possibly, there may be other worlds, where no such
apostasy

apostasy has taken place, and where Jehovah, the great Lord of all, is continually receiving the full tribute of honour, love, and service from thousands of intelligent and holy creatures. We have certain information, that there is one blessed society of this kind, the Angels of God in heaven, who will furnish us with matter of useful and delightful meditation, when we are distressed by a view of our own unhappy circumstances.

These exalted beings are, as much as ourselves, the workmanship of God, and as entirely dependent upon him. It should seem, that they were brought into existence before the human species; but they were made, even as we, in subjection to the holy law of God, and are required always to do his will, and shew forth his praise. "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, and honour, and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created *."

They are spirits, possessed of large intellectual faculties; and though they have not flesh and bones †, nor any corporeal form, like our's, they can become visible to us, when commissioned for special purposes. They are also endued with vigour of a superior sort; and accordingly they have produced effects, to which no human exertions would be equal. They are called "mighty Angels," and are said to "excel in strength ‡." Their chief residence is in heaven, where the ever-blessed God manifests the splendour of his Majesty; and where they are permitted "to behold the beauty

* Rev. iv. 11. † Luke xxiv. 39. ‡ 2 Thess. i. 7. Psal. ciii. 20.
of

of the Lord." Whilst, however, it is their privilege to appear in his immediate 'presence, they display his sovereignty and glory by bowing at his footstool. The society is extremely numerous. When Daniel saw "the Ancient of days" sitting on his throne, such was the prophet's computation of his attendant armies; "Thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him *." Our Lord declared, that he could have procured for his assistance "more than twelve legions of Angels †;" and it is further asserted, that their company is "innumerable ‡." They are distinguished into different orders, and possess different degrees of glory and perfection: this seems to be implied, when they are represented as "thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers §." Two of the celestial Hierarchy are mentioned under the names of Michael and Gabriel; and, from the transactions in which they bore a part, we may consider them as obtaining a preference, and as filling the places of peculiar eminence and dignity ||.

But, however they may be discriminated by various measures of excellence, they are all adorned with a splendour, which human eyes, in our present state, could not bear. Some of the most advanced saints on earth have been confounded by their appearance. There is no defect in any of them. They are completely holy, and completely happy: being in all respects conformed to the will of God, they enjoy the constant assurances of his love. They can therefore

* Dan. vii. 9, 10. † Matt. xxvi. 53. ‡ Heb. xii. 22.

§ Col. i. 16. || Jude 9. Lu. i. 19.

tell, from their own experience, that "in his presence is fulness of joy; at his right hand there are pleasures for evermore *." In them let us admire the great Creator, from whom they have derived whatever they possess, and who alone is "the perfection of beauty." To him let us look in fervent prayer for the communications of his grace, if we wish to resemble these blessed spirits. •

Let us enquire

I. What is their employment in the present administration of the divine government. The Lord himself, by his continual and sovereign agency, upholds and regulates every part of the universe, which he hath made. He wants no assistance; yet he is pleased to accomplish his purposes by various instruments, which he uses, not through weakness as earthly monarchs do, but for the display of his power and the glory of his majesty. The holy Angels are called his "chariots;" and "the Lord is among them," riding, as it were, in great state and triumph †. They surround his throne with unceasing songs of praise and adoration, and stand ready to fly wherever he shall appoint. • They are called his "ministers;" and, when commissioned by him for the execution of any plan, they proceed without hesitation, upon the first intimation of his will, being lively, quick, and penetrating, as "a flaming fire ‡." They "do his commandments," perfectly fulfilling all his pleasure, and esteeming it their honour to be employed in his service; yet they wait for his injunctions, "hearken-

* Psal. xvi. 11.

† Psal. lxxviii. 17. xlviii. 10.

‡ civ. 4.

ing unto the voice of his word *.” A revolt, indeed, has taken place among them, ‘in consequence of which many of their company were driven out of heaven. But these, of whom we now speak, have uniformly and in every instance maintained their obedience.

They are interested in the concerns of this lower world. When the Lord “laid the foundations of the earth,” they “sang together and shouted for joy †;” and from the beginning, as the instruments of divine Providence, they have borne a part in the administration of human affairs. Throughout the scripture history, we remark the interposition of Angels. By them the saints of God have been directed in their duty, warned of impending dangers, relieved under distresses, and rescued from enemies. We need not be particular in referring to examples. “The Angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them ‡.” To such the promise is express, “He shall give his Angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone §.” But they have been commissioned, also, to execute judgment, as well as to perform acts of kindness. Thus “an Angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it ||.” Thus the camp of the enemy of God was once visited by the sword of an avenger: at midnight the cry of death was heard in the hosts of Sennacherib, and, when morning rose, the slaughter of thousands testified to the haughty

* Psal. ciii. 20, 21. † Job xxxviii. 4, 7. ‡ Psal. xxxiv. 7.

§ xci. 11, 12.

|| 2 Sam. xxiv. 16.

monarch the stroke of an invisible arm *. To a similar agency we are taught, also, to ascribe the sudden destruction of that tyrant Herod, who was smitten with a mortal disease in the moment of his profane exultation †.

Such are the facts, which antient history records: and what reason can be assigned, why we should not believe these celestial messengers to be employed among ourselves, as they were in former times? Though we do not discern their intervention, and cannot ascertain its extent or effects, yet it ought not to be denied. And if it be allowed, does it not give us most exalted ideas of the divine Majesty? Is it so, that in every part of God's dominion, where we can be placed, we are surrounded by Angels; and that this innumerable company is continually occupied in carrying on the purposes of his administration? Then how unspeakably great and glorious must He be! Will it not, also, fix a serious and useful impression upon our minds, to be assured that these holy beings are about our path, watch over us, interest themselves in our happiness, and narrowly inspect our conduct? If only the veil of flesh and blood were removed, we should perceive ourselves in the midst of many witnesses. We know not, how much we are indebted to their kind and active exertions in our favour. But what do they observe in our deportment? Are we not guilty of those actions before them, from which we should be deterred by the presence of any human creature? Are

* 2 Kings xix. 35.

† Acts xii. 23.

we not, then, afraid, lest, while they attest our folly and perverseness, they should be commanded to relinquish their charge?

We proceed to consider

II. What attention they pay to the concerns of our salvation. Having preserved their original purity, they stand in no need of a Redeemer: yet, with a generous, disinterested affection, they rejoice in the grace, which is extended to us. It should seem, that the great plan, exhibited in the Gospel, is the subject of their holy meditations, and excites their praise and wonder. They do not treat it with contempt, as many of those evidently do, whose everlasting state depends upon it. Probably, they understand much of its glory, while they stoop down with eager solicitude to discover more. Though the lustre, which attracts their notice, prevents by its radiance their closer inspection, and compels them to confess, that it "passeth knowledge," yet they still long for a fuller revelation of the divine counsel: "they desire to look into the things," which are thus hidden from the view by their own incomprehensible excellence*.

They could not but feel astonishment, when first informed, that the exalted Personage, who is their Lord and God, was about to assume our nature, and become a suffering inhabitant of the earth, that he might rescue us from destruction. Even to the present hour they are unable to fathom this deep mystery. But they admire the divine perfections of wisdom, power, love, truth, and holiness, as displayed in the

* 1 Pet. i. 12.

cross of Christ: and, perhaps, in no other instance have they seen so much of the character of Jehovah. Accordingly, it is declared to be one part of the grand design, "that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God *.

"When the fulness of the time was come," that the Saviour should appear, they were employed in various ways. They announced his incarnation to Zacharias, Mary, and Joseph †, proclaimed "the good tidings" of his nativity to the shepherds, and then, in a numerous company, praised God "for his unspeakable gift ‡." They cried aloud, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Then indeed was "Jesus seen of Angels §:" they contemplated the incarnate God with fixed attention and holy admiration, and were required to acknowledge his divine character, by rendering him unfeigned homage. When the Father bringeth the First-begotten into the world, he saith, "Let all the Angels of God worship him ||."

During the whole of the Redeemer's abode on earth, even through his deepest humiliation, they waited upon him as their Lord. After his severe conflict in the wilderness, "Behold, Angels came, and ministered unto him †." When he was ready to faint by means of the agony and bloody sweat, which he endured in the garden of Gethsemane, "there appeared an Angel unto him from heaven

* Eph. iii. 10. † Matt. i. and Luke i. ‡ Luke ii. 8-14.

§ 1 Tim. iii. 16. || Heb. i. 6. † Matt. iv. 11.

strengthening him *." It was one of this illustrious society, who rolled away the stone, that his disciples might be permitted to examine his sepulchre; and it should seem, that several of these holy beings were employed in attesting his resurrection †. Upon his ascension into heaven, two of them in shining forms presented themselves to his Apostles, and predicted their Lord's triumphant return at the last day ‡: and when he, in human nature, entered into glory, amidst the acclamations of all his numerous host, his pre-eminence over them was declared; "Angels, and authorities, and powers being made subject unto him §."

As the servants of Jesus, they not only join in his praises with the Church above, but promote the purposes of his mercy in the Church below, by ways which we pretend not to explain. They are not sent forth to preach the Gospel; this honour being reserved for sinners, who feel their own need of that salvation, which they propose, and are more likely to sympathize with their hearers in all the various circumstances of distress and temptation. But these blessed spirits attend our religious assemblies; as witnesses of our devotions, and with a peculiar eagerness of desire for the success of the ministry ||. "There is joy in the presence of the Angels of God over one sinner that repenteth †;" as if every new convert was an addition to their happiness. Whilst they praise God for such an instance of his goodness, they exult

* Lu. xxii. 43. † Matt. xxviii. 2—7. Mar. xvi. 5—8.

Lu. xxi. 4—7. John xxi. 12. ‡ Acts i. 10; 11. § 1 Pet. iii. 22.
|| 1 Cor. xi. 10. Eccles. v. 6. † Lu. xv. 10.

in the victory obtained over the powers of darkness, and in the enlargement of the Redeemer's kingdom. They receive the young believer under their care, being commissioned to watch over him for his protection and comfort. Thus we are assured, with respect to the weakest and most inconsiderable members of the Church, "Their Angels," or those who are deputed to be their guardians, are no less than the exalted spirits, who stand near the throne and "always behold the face of God in heaven*." None of them are too great to be exempted from these services; "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them, who shall be heirs of salvation †?"

Soon they will deliver up their charge, and conduct the souls of those, who were committed to them, "through the valley of the shadow of death" to their glorious and blest abode. Thus when Lazarus died, he "was carried by the Angels into Abraham's bosom ‡." Believers, then, on their dismissal from the body, are attended by these holy beings, and enter into a state of immediate and delightful intercourse with them; so that they will join together, in one company, to ascribe "Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever §."

We profess to admire the excellency of this celestial host; but should we not, also, cultivate a similar disposition? While they, who are so eminent in wisdom, are giving all serious regard to the

* Matt. xviii. 10. † Heb. i. 14. ‡ Lu. xvi. 22. § Rev. v. 13.
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work of redemption, shall we think it a mark of good sense and superior understanding to turn from the consideration of it with disdain? Is it beneath us to imitate their example, and “desire to look into” the same important subject? We would, therefore, ask our readers, Do you, like the Angels, contemplate the incarnate God and Saviour with astonishment and fervour of affection, and bow before him with deepest reverence and adoration? Do you adopt their rapturous anthems, and praise God for the birth of his Son? How can you be unconcerned about this amazing transaction, with which the honour of God and the salvation both of yourselves and others is immediately connected? Do you feel a generous solicitude for the souls of your fellow creatures, and rejoice “over one sinner that repenteth?” Rather, have you not, on such an occasion, shewn a malignant displeasure, and thrown out virulent reproaches? Have you not exerted your influence to obstruct the progress of the Gospel? While you possess such tempers, these immaculate spirits cannot look upon you with favourable regard, however you may be esteemed and applauded by your gay and dissolute companions. O be persuaded to pay a deference to the opinion and example of those, whose wisdom and goodness stand unimpeached, and unite with them in the most vigorous efforts to do the will of God, and promote his glory!

In our attention to the character of Angels, it will be proper to examine

III. What concern they bear in the solemn proceedings

ceedings of the last day. The grand scheme of redemption being completed, the Saviour will appear as the supreme and universal Judge, and by his irrevocable sentence declare the everlasting state of the whole human race. How important the decision!

The scriptures do not represent these holy beings, as called to account for their conduct before the tribunal of Christ; but it should seem, that they will be employed for various purposes at his advent. When he shall descend from heaven, they will attend him as his faithful servants, and grace his triumph. "The Son of man shall come in his glory, with ten thousand of his saints, and all the holy Angels with him*:" so that heaven shall pour forth its inhabitants to display the majesty of the King and execute his orders. They shall give the summons for all mankind to stand at his bar. "The voice of the Archangel," announcing his approach, shall be particularly distinguished on that awful occasion †. "And he shall send his Angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other ‡." The tremendous sound will penetrate the deepest recesses of the grave; and each individual of Adam's posterity must obey the call.

All nations being now assembled before the Judge, and the different characters separated, arraigned, and tried, "every man's work shall be made manifest," and every secret thing be brought forth for public inspec-

* Matt. xxv. 31. Jude 14. † 1 Thess. iv. 16. ‡ Matt. xxiv. 31.

tion *. Then shall these illustrious spirits, who surround the throne, not only stand as witnesses, but even be appealed to for the equity of the solemn proceedings. This, at least, seems to be implied in our Lord's declarations: "Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the Angels of God: but he that denieth me before men, shall be denied before the Angels of God †." They, likewise, will be commissioned to carry the decisive sentence into immediate execution. They are "the reapers," to whom the Lord of the harvest will say, "Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn ‡." When, therefore, the Judge shall pronounce, "Come, ye blessed," and, "Depart from me, ye cursed §," they, acknowledging and approving the just award, will conduct the righteous with great triumph to their mansions of bliss and glory, and thrust down the impenitent, with shame and everlasting contempt, into the fire prepared for the Devil and his apostate company.

Who among us can read or hear of these things with indifference? Let us not forget, how much we are interested in the transactions of that day. We must all obey the summons of the Archangel's trumpet, and stand before the great tribunal. But how shall we bear the strict examination, when our actions and principles shall be sifted, and exhibited to public view, before the inhabitants of heaven, as well

* 1 Cor. iii. 13. iv. 5. † Lu. xii. 8, 9. ‡ Matt. xiii. 30, 39.

§ xxv. 34, 41.

as those of earth? Are there none, who will wish to hide their heads, or fly from the presence of the Judge? But an escape or concealment will be impossible. The most stout-hearted sinner must await his doom; nor can he resist or retard the infliction of his punishment. When the tremendous sentence shall be pronounced, "Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness *," the word will be powerful and the execution instantaneous. No accusation, however, shall prevail against those, who are justified by the faith of Jesus. They shall go into life eternal, attended by all the host of heaven, before whom they shall receive the high distinctions of the crown of righteousness and the palm of victory: they shall be clothed with white raiment, and even seated with the Saviour in his throne. Such honour will the saints of God obtain, in the presence, and by the ministrations, of Angels.

In relation to these bright spirits, it remains only that we observe,

IV. What will be their situation in the kingdom of glory for ever. We have already remarked, that they are admitted to view the full and unveiled splendour of the Deity, and, while they wait in readiness to perform his pleasure, are continually offering up the song and sacrifice of praise. We presume not to explain the nature of their worship: but some general account is given us by the prophet. Isaiah tells us, that he "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up;" that "above it stood the Seraphims, and one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy

* Matt. xxv. 30.

is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory*." Such, we conclude, will be their state and employment through eternity: for, as they are called "the elect Angels †," they will never be dispossessed of their present happiness and exaltation.

We know not, that any particular change will be made in their condition at the last judgment; but it is probable, that they will experience an increase of felicity. Being confirmed in their purity and obedience, and united as one family with all redeemed saints, they will join with one heart and voice in praising and adoring God and the Lamb. The Lord Jesus Christ is the centre of this union: in Him they meet, and are incorporated into the same society. Accordingly St. Paul declares, it was the grand purpose of God, "That in the dispensation of the fulness of times, he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in Him ‡." The object of their worship is the same, and a perfect agreement in sentiment and affection will subsist between them. Yet a distinction must be made. The Angels, who never sinned, cannot be considered as the purchase of the Saviour, and are not indebted to his sacrifice and intercession for the honourable situation, in which they are placed. They are struck with the view of his grace and glory, and constrained to sing, with a rapturous admiration, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain." But those of our fallen race, whom he hath ransomed from sin and hell, will feel their superior obligations, and endeavour to express their

* Isa. vi. 1—3. † 1 Tim. v. 21. ‡ Eph. i. 10.

gratitude and affection, in strains peculiar to themselves; for they will add, "He hath redeemed us to God by his blood *." This, indeed, is a song, "which no man can learn," but those, "who follow the Lamb, whithersoever he goeth †."

The faithful disciples of Christ may look forwards with unspeakable delight to that time, when they shall join the blessed society above. Perhaps, you are now surrounded by those, who despise and blaspheme the God of heaven; but soon shall you be united to them, who love and serve him without weariness or imperfection. You carry about with you, for the present, an infirm, vile, corruptible body, and, what is more painful, a depraved mind; but after a few days you shall be rescued from this state of degradation and bondage, when you shall resemble the Angels themselves in purity, happiness, and glory ‡. Even here, indeed, you worship and obey the same Lord, and the thought may afford you some consolation, when you are ready to conclude that you are left alone, and that there are none to take your part. Thousands of these spotless beings stand round about you, approve your conduct, and are commissioned to minister to your relief. Could you draw aside the veil which conceals the invisible world, what a scene would be displayed! Enough to render you superior to all the insults and cruelties of an opposing world. Like Elisha, when compassed with threatening enemies, you would see these chariots of fire sent down from heaven in your defence; and, possessing your

* Rev. v. 8—13.

† xiv. 3, 4.

‡ Matt. xxii.

souls in peace, you would exclaim with the prophet, "Fear not; for they that be with us, 'are more than they that be with them *."

But, while you rejoice in their friendship and protection, you should propose their bright examples of goodness for your own imitation. At least, you should not be satisfied with any thing short of their obedience. Your Lord himself has taught you to pray, that the will of God may be done on earth, "as it is in heaven." You are not to regulate your practice by the defective standard of human righteousness, but must press forwards to attainments, which may, in some measure, resemble the holiness of Angels. They serve God perfectly, without exception of one duty; constantly, without intermission; and cheerfully, without compulsion; nay, with fervent love and supreme delight. This, also, you should aspire after; and therefore earnestly covet and implore increasing communications of that grace, by which you will finally be brought into a state of complete conformity with them. But, on comparing yourselves with the pattern here exhibited, are you not deeply ashamed and humbled?

Those pure and exalted creatures in every respect answer the end of their being. Many, alas! of our corrupt race, are not merely defective in righteousness, but totally opposite to this character. Do we not live among those, who are actuated by tempers and principles, as contrary to those of Angels, as darkness to light? We, therefore, solemnly appeal

* 2 Kings vi. 15—17.

to them, and ask, Of what sort will be your society hereafter? Disposed as you now are, you cannot have fellowship with the host of heaven, nor they with you. Their employment is what you will never relish: you detest and put away from you, what is their highest delight. It is not possible, that they should accommodate themselves to your depraved taste; for this would involve an opposition to God and an exclusion from happiness. Your prospect is indeed tremendous. You must dwell with those, whom you resemble, and with whom you are confederate in rebellion against Jehovah. Is this what you can bear to think of? Yet most assuredly, you must have your portion with evil spirits, unless you be created anew in Christ Jesus.

May the Lord God, in sovereign mercy, pour out his sanctifying influence upon all orders and ranks of men! May He form us to be a people for his name, and make us of one heart and mind with the Church above! So shall we understand and feel the meaning of those exalted anthems, which we are taught to use. With sincere and ardent devotion we shall cry aloud to the God of our salvation; "With Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name; evermore praising thee, and saying, Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts; heaven and earth are full of thy glory: Glory be to thee, O Lord most High *!" Amen.

* Communion Service.

EVIL SPIRITS.

C H A P. XIV.

Evil spirits, their existence, fall, and exclusion from heaven—tempted our first parents—maintain large influence in the earth, among the impenitent—once were permitted to possess men's bodies—opposed the Saviour—still resist the progress of the Gospel—assault believers—yet their agency does not extenuate our guilt—will soon be confounded—summoned to judgment—and doomed to eternal punishment.

AFTER the strong proofs, which we have seen, of man's apostasy from God, perhaps the question may arise, Is this the only order of intelligent beings, who have revolted from their obedience? Or, where did sin originate? The sacred records have informed us of another system of creatures, who were the first transgressors, and are the authors and abettors of that rebellion, which has prevailed in our own world. We proceed, therefore, to observe, that there are Devils in hell, as well as Angels in heaven. There is a numerous company of wicked spirits, who discover a blasphemous contempt of God, and are continually endeavouring to defeat the purposes of his government. The contemplation of their wretched condition may excite many painful sensations; but the sub-

ject seems properly to come under our plan, as being closely connected with scripture history, and it may be productive of solid advantage, if we consider it with true seriousness of mind.

Their influence in human affairs, and even their existence have been denied. But, if we allow the inspiration of the Bible, we ought implicitly to receive its testimony in every particular. We attempt to invalidate its authority, if we think ourselves at liberty to reject those declarations, however clear and express, which cannot be accommodated to our systems or wishes. Now, no account can be delivered in plainer terms, none more repeatedly asserted and confirmed, than that which is given of the fallen angels. It is no good objection to this history, that it does not contain so full and minute a relation, as our curiosity might desire: for it never was designed, that we should understand every thing, or obtain perfect satisfaction in our speculative enquiries. But, if we admit what the scriptures have revealed concerning the state, character, and employment of evil spirits, we shall have a consistent explanation of what we observe both in ourselves and others. A serious attention to the world around us, and to the wild and irregular workings, of which we cannot but be conscious in our own minds, would incline us to believe, even if we had no Bible, that we are subject to a foreign influence of a malignant kind. Universal experience verifies what the inspired volume has affirmed. May we be led to admire and adore that grace, which not only restrains the malice of these unholy beings, but

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is effectual to rescue us from their power ! May our great Deliverer break the bonds, by which many of our sinful race are still enslaved, and give them to know, that his service is the most perfect freedom !

In the history of wicked spirits we must consider

I. Their fall. A total and lamentable change has taken place both in their situation and disposition. Originally they were possessed of dignity, purity, and happiness, which they have now entirely lost. They were ranked amongst the Angels in heaven, and equal to them in excellency and glory ; but they “ kept not their first estate :” renouncing their obedience to God, they “ left their own habitation,” being driven out with shame and confusion *. They are called “ principalities and powers,” and are said to have been “ in high places † ;” which shews that they were endued with eminent faculties, and distinguished among the superior orders of the celestial Hierarchy. But their exaltation was no preservative : they have suffered a tremendous degradation. A numerous company, combined under one leader, who is named Satan or Beelzebub, joined in rebellion against Jehovah. We do not enquire into the particular nature and circumstances of their transgression. But it should seem, that they were instigated by ambition, or a vain desire of knowledge or preeminence beyond the divine appointment : for, when St. Paul speaks of one “ lifted up with pride,” he describes him as “ falling into the condemnation of the Devil ‡.” It is sufficient, however, to say, that they sinned.

* Jude 6.

† Eph. vi. 12.

‡ 1 Tim. iii. 6.

Having,

Having, then, cast off their allegiance to God, they could no longer associate with those, whose whole delight is to do his will, and worship at his feet. Having lost their holiness, they could not retain their felicity; for misery is the necessary consequence of depravity and guilt. Every good principle was banished, every vile affection admitted: they became a torment to themselves. But their wretchedness is not to be considered merely as the unavoidable effect of their apostasy: it is the righteous infliction of their incensed Sovereign. His authority being despised, his anger was provoked, and his justice armed with terrors against them. He could not suffer them to remain in heaven, with a spirit of disobedience or independence. He appointed them a new place, and consigned them to a state of extreme and endless punishment in hell, where they are exhibited as an example of the malignant nature and destructive tendency of sin. How astonishing a change was this! Let us learn from it to revere the holiness of God, who "cannot look on iniquity," and the strictness of his government, which guards his law by so tremendous a penalty as "the vengeance of eternal fire." "Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name?" Thou art, indeed, "a consuming fire" to all, who presume to resist thy power. While we hear of thine awful dispensations towards the rebellious angels, "our flesh trembleth for fear of thee, and we are afraid of thy judgments *."

* Psal. cxix. 120.

In considering the case of these apostate creatures, we must proceed to remark .

II. Their present situation and employment. It was not possible that by any exertions they should recover their former abode and purity, and we apprehend that they have never really wished it. They could not deliver themselves from torment, or return to their former allegiance. They retain an invariable, rooted enmity against God; and it should seem, that ever since their fall they have been attempting to overturn or obstruct his government. Such, evidently, appeared to be their disposition at the creation of our world. Perhaps, the happiness of our first parents excited their envy. Certain it is, that upon them they fixed their malicious eyes, and consulted how to cast them down from their eminence, and draw them into the same state of disobedience and misery with themselves. They contrived a temptation, which, through the subtle management of their grand leader, succeeded. He took the opportunity of spreading the snare before Eve, when she was alone. He solicited her compliance, by proposing a pleasant gratification of appetite, and a more exalted condition. She listened to his lies, which were couched in fair speeches: she consented, and then prevailed upon her husband also to transgress.

Thus the standard of rebellion was erected upon the earth; its inhabitants were seduced, and joined in confederacy with the infernal host. Those wicked spirits, probably, triumphed in that calamitous event, as if they had prevailed against Jehovah, and represented him as a weak and cruel tyrant, who could

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not secure his own dominion, or preserve the affection of his subjects. The very end of our creation seemed to be defeated; and, had not God in sovereign mercy interposed to repair the breach, the whole human race must have remained for ever alienated from him, and exposed to his fierce indignation.

We perceive, by what tempers these unholy beings are influenced. A proud opposition to God, an hatred of all goodness, assiduity and zeal in promoting evil, falsehood, and treachery, an envious disgust at the happiness or excellence of others, and a desire to spread sin and misery to the greatest possible extent,—these are some of the leading principles, which mark the character of Satan and his associates. “He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar and the father of it*.” “The devil sinneth from the beginning†:” He was the original transgressor, and has ever since been practising iniquity with unceasing activity and vigour. This is “our adversary,” whom we are required to “resist, steadfast in the faith,” “because, as a roaring lion, he walketh about, seeking whom he may devour‡.” All his apostate company are of like description. They are called “spiritual wickedness §,” or wicked spirits: they are themselves most corrupt and abominable, and unwearied in their endeavours to render others equally depraved.

Their stratagems, alas! have been fatally successful

* John viii. 44.

† 1 John iii. 8.

‡ 1 Pet. v. 8, 9.

§ Eph. vi. 12.

among the human race. For which reason, it should seem, Satan is styled “the prince”, and “the god of this world *.” He cannot possess any rightful authority; yet he meets with general submission, though he is a base usurper. We speak of him as the representative of all the fallen spirits, and ascribe to him whatever they effect or attempt, since he directs their movements. Let us examine, what influence he has exercised, and what mischief he has produced among the posterity of Adam. The account may be offensive to our pride; but, without wishing to conceal or palliate the truth, we must give a faithful representation of the case.

In the old testament Satan was “the lying spirit,” by whom the false prophets were instigated †; and in the new, those preachers, who pervert right doctrine, are said to be his ministers ‡. Nay, it is expressly declared, that all those, who like him are actuated by pride, envy, malice, or deceit, are his children, and “will do the lusts of their father §.” He it was, who tempted Judas to sell and betray the Saviour, and, having taken full possession of the perfidious wretch, deserted him not, till he had accomplished his utter destruction of body and soul ||. The same infernal agent “filled the heart of Ananias to lie to the Holy Ghost †:” and wherever any persons reject salvation, the effect is in some measure to be ascribed to Satan’s malignant interference. He “hath blinded the minds

* John xvi. 11. 2 Cor. iv. . . . † 1 Kings xxii. 21—23.

‡ 2 Cor. xi. 15.

§ John viii. 44.

|| John xiii. 2, 27.

† Acts v. 3.

of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them *.” He is “ the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience †.” Sinners may not be aware whom they serve, and under whose instigation they act. But from the scriptures we learn, that Satan maintains dominion over them, and that, however they may seem to differ from each other, they all follow his guidance, and bear his image. He stirs up Antichrist to oppose or pervert the purity of the Gospel ‡; and “ takes captive at his will” those who resist the truth §. We readily allow, perhaps, that such atrocious offenders as “ Cain, who slew his brother,” may be “ of that wicked one;” but it is equally certain, that “ he that committeth sin,” though it be in a less scandalous way, “ is of the devil ||.” Such declarations should excite us to enquire with real earnestness, “ To whom do we yield ourselves servants to obey?”

Various are the devices, by which our spiritual adversary prevails. He tempts men to the practice of evil, by exhibiting to their view a flattering prospect of its pleasure, and concealing the danger. He suggests to them, as he did to our first parents, “ Ye shall not surely die ‡;” and it seems to be the masterpiece of his subtlety, to induce them to believe that there is no future punishment. Thus he endeavours to lull them asleep and stupify their consciences, not

* 2 Cor. iv. 4.

† Eph. ii. 2.

‡ 2 Theff. ii. 9.

§ 2 Tim. ii. 26.

|| 1 John iii. 8, 12.

‡ Gen. iii. 4.

from a benevolent desire of rendering them happy; but that he may more effectually secure their obedience to himself, and accomplish their final destruction. He is “the strong man,” who gains possession of the sinner’s heart, and there being “armed keepeth his palace; and his goods are in peace*.”

Yet his malignity has appeared in other forms. At the time of our Lord’s incarnation, he was permitted, for special reasons, to exercise a peculiar power over the bodies of many persons, who were, in consequence, miserably afflicted and tormented. In their distressful cases we perceive, that he studies to torture and destroy by every possible method. It has been thought, that those, who by Apostolical censures were “delivered unto Satan,” suffered in the same way; and that the evil spirit, as the executioner of divine justice, inflicted upon them certain diseases, or excruciating pains†. But, be that as it may, such is his malice, that, if he were left without restraint to gratify his own mischievous disposition, we should no longer experience a moment’s ease, or enjoy our faculties either of body or mind: the earth would be a resemblance of hell. O how great are our obligations to our Almighty Preserver!

It becomes us, in an especial manner, to adore the God of all grace, who proposes in the Gospel complete and final deliverance from our infernal adversary. The Lord Jesus Christ has lifted up a standard against him, and undertakes for all believers to defeat his purposes. He has interposed to ransom them by

* Luke xi. 21.

† 1 Cor. v. 5. 1 Tim. i. 20.

the might of his Spirit, and at the expense of his own precious blood. The merciful design was revealed to our first parents, immediately after their revolt, when it was declared, that the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head *. Satan is unwilling to renounce the dominion, which he has usurped, and with violence opposes the intentions of the Redeemer. There are, therefore, two contending parties: a sharp conflict has been maintained from the beginning; and it is not possible, that any reconciliation between them should be effected. This circumstance exhibits another feature in the character of the fiend: he resists the Saviour, and labours with the utmost vigour to prevent or obstruct the influence of his grace. O let us be afraid of bearing any the most distant resemblance to such a horrid disposition!

During our Lord's abode on earth, he endured extreme distress from the violent assaults of this antagonist. Forty days he was harassed by his temptations in the wilderness: and then the devil, when vanquished and obliged to retire, departed only "for a season †." Probably, the attack was renewed, though without success. Jesus observed to his enemies, near the close of his life, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness ‡:" whence it should seem, that Satan was then permitted to make his fiercest onset, and to try what his malice could do. But, with a reference to that onset, the Saviour exclaimed in a delightful exultation, "The prince of this world cometh,

* Gen. iii. 15.

† Luke iv. 13.

‡ xxii. 53.

and hath nothing in me *.” The foe, indeed, so far prevailed, as to procure the crucifixion, and to enjoy a temporary triumph in the completion of his wishes; but that event proved the ruin of his own kingdom. We are encouraged to rejoice, that our victorious Redeemer “through death destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil †.”

Consistently with his character as “the enemy of all righteousness,” Satan has uniformly endeavoured to obstruct the Gospel. This being the most effectual instrument for “the pulling down of his strong holds,” and the emancipation of his captives, he may be expected to oppose it with all his strength and subtlety. Wherever, therefore, the word of grace and salvation is preached, he watches for an opportunity to prevent its success. Like a bird of the air, he hovers about the place in which the good seed is sown, and takes it out of men’s hearts, “lest they should believe and be saved ‡.” He is the enemy, which soweth tares in the field with a view to defeat the designs of its proprietor §. If we are favoured with an evangelical ministry, the consideration of such a malicious intruder should awaken a holy circumspection and fear. As it is his plan to keep us in ignorance and unbelief, he will endeavour to cast reproach upon the truth, and fill our minds with prejudice. Let us suspect and guard against his influence. The most violent persecutors of the Church are his instruments: he assists them in the contrivance and execution of their schemes. Even the

* John xiv. 30.

† Heb. ii. 14.

‡ Luke viii. 12.

§ Matt. xiii. 37—39.

imprisonment

imprisonment of the saints is ascribed to him, because it is effected under his instigation*. He is active, likewise, in promoting false doctrines and divisions among Christians, as the probable means of obstructing the work of God. How solicitous should we be, lest through our folly or perverseness “ he get an advantage of us !” We ought to be constantly aware “ of his devices †.”

Those, who are rescued from his dominion, and devoted to the service of Christ, must look for a severe attack, since the tyrant will not quietly resign his prey. Young converts generally experience a peculiar degree of his malice. He seems to practise upon them every method of temptation, by which he may shake their religious principles, and subject them again to his own authority. When these fail, and they, who were once his willing captives, are evidently brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God, then indeed the power of the usurper is broken, but his enmity remains the same. He will continually endeavour to disturb the peace of believers, and distress those whom he cannot destroy. This malignant influence alone will account for the strange commotions, which are excited in their minds. Difficulties, doubts, and fears are suggested, by which their faith is staggered; and with a kind of violent importunity they are solicited to act in opposition to their better judgment and desires. Such is the warfare, which they must be prepared to maintain through life. Satan is a restless opponent; when one scheme fails, he will try

* Rev. ii. 10.

† 2 Cor. ii. 11.

the effect of another. He is constantly aiming to harass and seduce the servants of the Lord by some new device, and with every fresh circumstance he varies his mode of attack.

He it was, who tempted David to transgress, probably through motives of ambition, by numbering the people*. By his malevolent interference, Job, that eminent saint of God, was reduced to a state of extreme distress, confusion, and horror. When "Joshua the high priest," as the representative of the Church, "stood before the Angel of the Lord," pleading for acceptance, "Satan stood at his right hand to resist him †." This is a striking picture of our adversary's employment: for he is "the accuser of our brethren, who accuseth them before our God day and night ‡." The Apostles of Christ were once induced to forsake their Lord; but he himself accounted for that strange event, when he said, "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat §." St. Paul was perplexed and almost overwhelmed by a severe affliction, which he calls "a thorn in the flesh;" but the sharpness of the trial was owing to the influence of this wicked spirit: it was "the messenger of Satan to buffet him ||." After such instances, who shall expect to escape an attack? Every believer is called to be a soldier, and expressly required to be prepared for the combat, by "putting on the whole armour of God," in order "to stand against the wiles of the devil ‡." It is spoken of as

* 1 Chron. xxi. 1.

§ Luke xxii. 31.

† Zech. iii. 1.

|| 2 Cor. xii. 7.

‡ Rev. xii. 10.

‡ Eph. vi. 11.

probable

probable that the foe may shoot his "fiery darts" into the soul, whilst an assurance is given, that "the shield of faith" will quench them*. There is therefore only one method of safety; "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you†."

It should be remembered, that, notwithstanding the power of the tempter, our moral liberty is not so impaired, as to render us in any degree the less accountable for our actions. He may propose the commission of sin, and solicit our compliance; but he cannot succeed, except by our own voluntary consent. Yet, alas! how prone we are to yield to his suggestions! Such is the depravity of our nature, that it is always ready to second his attempts; and therefore his ascendancy over us will not furnish us with an excuse; nay rather, it shews the greatness of our guilt. We are his willing vassals; and his service, though most oppressive, is what we choose. We must blame him, but we cannot acquit ourselves. Let us lie down ashamed, and earnestly deprecate that wrath, which we have deserved.

In attending to the scriptural declarations concerning apostate spirits, we have only to remark further

III. Their future doom. They are already consigned to a state of extreme punishment, as the due reward of their transgression, without hope of deliverance. Their character and situation are fixed and determined for ever. A Saviour is provided for us, but not for them: and yet there was nothing in our case, any more than in their's, which could encourage

* Eph. vi. 16.

† James iv. 7.

an expectation of forgiveness. Criminals can have no claim to favour. Here, then, 'we beheld the astonishing grace and distinguishing love of our Redeemer. They are dealt with in the way of strict justice, and cannot complain of suffering wrongfully. But rich mercy is displayed towards our species. The Lord Jesus "took not on him the nature of angels," he did not interpose for the rescue of those miserable beings, who were once angels in heaven; "but he took on him the seed of Abraham," pledging himself for the salvation of all those of the human race, who should partake of that Patriarch's faith*.

The present system exhibits a conflict between the evil spirits and our exalted Redeemer: but it is drawing to a close, and the final issue will be for his glory and their everlasting confusion. In the prospect of this complete victory, Jesus at one time exclaimed, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven †;" and at another, "Now shall the prince of this world be cast out ‡." St. Paul also thus encourages believers to triumph on the same account, "The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly §." The malignant fiend will be permitted to maintain his influence among men a little longer. But soon he shall be bound for a thousand years ||, and during that period confined to his own place, without exercising the destructive power upon earth, which he now possesses. His dominion shall be subdued, and "the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our

* Heb. ii. 16.

† Luke x. 18.

‡ John xii. 31.

§ Rom. xvi. 20.

|| Rev. xx. 2.

Lord and of his Christ*.” Afterwards, he shall be suffered to regain his ascendancy for a short season, in which, as it should seem, iniquity will prevail more generally than it has ever done †. But “the end of all things” will immediately succeed, and exhibit a tremendous scene.

Satan and his vile associates will be summoned to the tribunal of Christ, and examined in the last judgment. However haughty and unwilling, they must bend their necks before the injured majesty of God, and the malignity of their characters and the justice of their punishment will be publicly evinced. They are now “reserved in everlasting chains under darkness,” and there can be no possibility of escape: but they will be brought forth “to the judgment of the great day ‡,” that their conduct may be submitted to the inspection of the assembled universe. The horrid stratagems, by which they deceive the world and harass the Church of God, will then be unfolded, and greatly aggravate their condemnation. Believers, who are now the object of their malice, will triumph in their destruction; being admitted to preside, as the assessors of Christ, in that solemn trial. They will approve, rejoice in, and in some sense pass the sentence. “Know ye not,” said St. Paul, “that we shall judge angels §?”

The book of judgment being closed, these apostate spirits will be “cast into the lake of fire and brimstone ||,” where their misery will surpass our utmost conceptions, and whence there can be no release.

* Rev. xi. 15.

† xx. 7, &c.

‡ Jude 6.

§ 1 Cor. vi. 3.

|| Rev. xx. 10.

Impenitent sinners, also, shall have their portion with them. Though the fire was “prepared for the Devil and his angels*,” because they were the original transgressors, yet there shall they all, the deceived and the deceiver, in one horrible company, “be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” This torment will in no respect tend to change or soften their obdurate minds. They will retain their hatred of God, “blaspheme his name, and not repent, to give him glory †.” The justice of God, therefore, will not remove or mitigate the punishment throughout eternity. It is declared in the most express terms, of which language is capable, that it shall be “everlasting.” And who shall presume to object, or prescribe to God the proper measures of his government, as if we were more competent to decide, what his own righteous perfections may demand?

The awful subject naturally gives rise to various reflections.

1. Let “the redeemed of the Lord” rejoice and triumph in their great Deliverer. While you contemplate the character and state of the infernal host, you cannot but be deeply impressed with your immense obligations. Are you not constrained to cry out, with devout admiration of your distinguished mercies, “Behold, what hath God wrought?” How much has Jesus done; how much has he pledged himself to accomplish, in your behalf! Already, you are “delivered from the power of darkness ‡,” and “have

* Matt. xxv. 41.

† Rev. xvi. 9.

‡ Col. i. 13.

overcome the wicked one*.” But for the present, you may expect to feel very painful attacks from your malicious foe, though you shall not fall by his hands. His purposes against you shall finally be baffled, and even rendered subservient to your spiritual and eternal welfare. Only remember, whence all your strength is to be derived: you will “overcome him by the blood of the Lamb †.” To your faith you must likewise add a diligent attention to duty. You are required to wrestle and fight, to watch and pray: and this should be your daily, your unceasing employment. You have ratified the solemn vow, that you will “renounce the Devil and all his works ‡:” never, then, dare to think of returning to his infamous service. Lift up your supplication to the God of all grace, that He may “deliver you from evil,” from the wicked one §, “from his crafts and assaults,” and “finally beat down Satan under your feet ||.”

2. Let penitents, who feel their own weakness, and dread the power of these spiritual enemies, be encouraged. We allow, that there would be just cause for fear and despondency, if there were none to administer support. • But the Lord hath said, “I have laid help upon One that is mighty †.” We refer you to Jesus, who can dispossess “the strong man, and take from him all his armour, wherein he trusted **.” O fly to this Saviour, and entreat his gracious assistance and protection! “Surely, He shall deliver thee from

* 1 John ii. 13.
§ Lord's Prayer.

† Rev. xii. 11.
|| Litany.
** Luke xi. 22.

‡ Catechism.
‡ Psalm lxxxix. 19.

the snare of the fowler:—He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler*.” The horrid temptations, by which you are assaulted, and which excite distressing apprehensions in your minds, are a favourable sign. We conclude, from the violence of your adversary, that you are rescued from his dominion; for, if you were still held in subjection, he would not alarm, but quiet your fears, and lull your consciences asleep. Persist, then, in a determined opposition to the prince of darkness, and indulge the pleasing hope, that Jesus has broken the yoke of your oppressor, and will shortly give you complete deliverance.

3. Let careless sinners be persuaded to consider, whose servants they are, and how their schemes of iniquity must terminate. It appears from the scripture account, however unwilling you may be to acknowledge it, that, while you are alienated from God, you are in subjection to Satan. You yield a ready compliance to the proposals of that evil spirit; you act as his confederates, under his influence, and are conformed to his likeness. And does he not excite in your hearts such tempers and affections, as render you wretched in yourselves, and mischievous to society? Where, then, can you expect your final portion? “If God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell †,” is it to be imagined, that he will spare you, who despise and reject that mercy, which was never offered to them? You “count the

* Psal. xci. 3, 4.

† 2 Pet. ii. 4.

blood of the Covenant, an unholy thing, and do despite unto the Spirit of grace *:" but this is a degree of iniquity, with which they are not chargeable. What can equal the heinousness of your guilt? "How shall you escape, if you neglect so great salvation †?" O be persuaded, while opportunity is allowed you, to "flee from the wrath to come!"

Heb. x. 29.

† ii. 3.

CONCLUSION.

CHAP. XV.

Self-examination recommended, as a proper improvement of "Scripture Characters."—Enquiries proposed: Are we among the saints, or the impenitent?—What is our state, conduct, and principles?—Are we "in the faith," and conformed to Jesus Christ, by virtue of a spiritual union with him?

HAVING finished our plan of deducing practical reflections from scripture examples, we may now close the subject by calling upon every reader to enquire, whether he has made a suitable improvement. Religion does not consist in curious speculations: it is a personal concern. We ought not, therefore, to be satisfied with collecting or analyzing the historical accounts, recorded in the sacred volume, or deciding upon the different people, whose cases have passed in review before us: we should seriously consider, what is our own spiritual state, and under what description we are to be classed. As the knowledge of ourselves is of far greater consequence than any other, we should direct all our studies to the attainment of that important object. How forcible, and how exactly adapted to our purpose, is the exhortation of the Apostle! "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove

prove your own selves: know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates *?" Let us attend to this solemn counsel, and pray that He, "unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid †," may search and try us, deliver us from all hypocrisy, "and lead us in the way everlasting."

It seems to have been the design of God, in allotting so large a portion of his word to the description of various characters, to fix our regard upon ourselves; and, without such a particular application, it is not probable, that we shall reap any solid advantage from scripture history. While we are forming an opinion concerning the celebrated names of antiquity, let each one ask, What am I to be accounted of? "Enoch had this testimony, that he pleased God ‡;" but do I possess any evidence of a similar kind? I read that "Abraham was called the friend of God §:" but am I a child of Abraham? Moses is represented as peculiarly eminent for his meekness of spirit: am not I carried away by the influence of pride, envy, and revenge? While I behold the holy life of Jesus, the Son of God, is not the tenour of my conduct totally opposite? Though I perceive and approve the zeal, courage, and assiduity of his Apostles, am not I destitute of fervent love to his name, and concern for his glory, being indolent, fearful, and unbelieving?

If we pursue these enquiries through the scriptures, to what conclusion will they lead us? But the scru-

* 2 Cor. xiii. 5. † Communion Service. ‡ Heb. xi. 5. § James ii. 23.
tiny

tiny proposed is unpleasant; and most persons start back from it, as conscious of a defect, and aware that their accounts are bad. We apprehend that many study the sacred writings, merely to gratify their curiosity in speculating upon the various characters there exhibited, and indulge a proud, censorious disposition in passing sentence upon them, while they are averse to a serious examination of, their own hearts. Are we, then, at liberty to neglect the repeated injunctions given us, to “search and try our ways *,” and “prove our own work †?” Or, is the examination of no consequence? If our state be safe, it will have a happy tendency to fill our minds with confidence and joy: and on this ground it seems highly necessary, even to advanced Christians, in order that they may be preserved in peace, and encouraged to pursue the great object of their high calling with increasing ardour. But, granting that we may possibly remain under the divine displeasure, is it not peculiarly desirable to be apprized of our danger? And are we not most likely, by a faithful enquiry, to discover our mistakes, and the way of obtaining deliverance? In such a case, surely, a supine indifference about the event is unpardonable, and must be expected to terminate in final destruction. The duty, here recommended, may appear difficult: but it ought not therefore to be declined. The chief difficulty to be removed is our disinclination to every thing truly spiritual; and this circumstance, so far from being an excuse, furnishes an additional reason for applying to the work in the most vigorous manner.

Lamen. iii. 40.

† Gal. vi. 4.

In the sacred records we meet with different and opposite descriptions of men. Some were, confessedly, dear to God and eminent in holiness, "a peculiar people, zealous of good works." The question, then, arises, Do we resemble them in temper, principle, and practice? If we compare ourselves with Noah, Daniel, and Job, what likeness do we discover? Noah maintained his integrity, and "walked with God," in a time of general depravity, when the earth was deluged with wickedness. The conduct of Daniel was so circumspect and unblamable, that his malignant accusers were constrained to say, "We shall not find any occasion against him, except we find it concerning the law of his God:" and such was the fervour of his piety, that he chose rather to be cast into a den of lions, than abandon his religion. Job was perplexed and almost overwhelmed with accumulated afflictions and violent temptations; but, in the midst of his sharpest distresses, he possessed a firm dependence on his God, and shewed an uncommon measure of meekness and submission. If we turn to the new testament, we behold the Apostles of the Lord, men who spent their strength, and cheerfully hazarded their lives for the name of Jesus: we follow them to their deaths, and see many sealing the faith with their blood. Do we trace in any of these persons a representation of our own character? Are we actuated by similar dispositions? If otherwise; if we be in every respect totally opposite, how can we hope with them to inherit the promises?

The scriptures exhibit instances of those, who were

the avowed adversaries of the Lord, and lived in open disobedience to his government. Cain is described as the enemy of true religion, the persecutor, and at length the murderer, of his righteous brother. Pharaoh appears as 'a daring rebel, unhumbled under the most tremendous judgments, and hardening his heart in defiance of the God of heaven. Judas, the apostate disciple of our Lord, is introduced as an example of the pernicious tendency of covetousness, betraying his Master for a fordid bribe. In Herod, the bloody king, who harassed the Church, we behold a proud and presumptuous sinner suddenly checked in his career, and stripped of his glory. While we mark their prevailing tempers, let us ask, Are we not under the influence of the same vile affections, or of others equally detestable? Let us, then, not be satisfied with condemning them, but pass an impartial judgment upon ourselves; and, whereinsoever we have perversely violated our duty, let us with shame and contrition acknowledge our own baseness.

From these considerations we shall be led to enquire

1. What is our state? There is an immense difference between the condition of a child of God, who is an heir of heaven, and that of an impenitent sinner, obnoxious to eternal wrath. We should examine, therefore, with which of these we may expect our final portion. We are all by nature depraved and prone to evil: are we renewed in righteousness, through the efficacious, but mysterious, agency of the

Holy Spirit? We are transgressors of the divine law, and as such liable to suffer everlasting misery. Is the sentence cancelled? Or is there any plea, with which we can arrest the arm of justice ready to take vengeance? Who shall interpose in our behalf? There is One, of high dignity, who "hath made peace through the blood of his cross," obtained "reconciliation for iniquity, and brought in everlasting righteousness." Are we truly acquainted with his character? Or have we applied by faith for the blessings of his salvation? It were absurd and presumptuous to conclude favourably concerning our own state, unless "we have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us*." But if, through the merits of the Saviour, we possess an humble confidence towards God, we should ask further,

2. What is the tenour of our conduct? Is it such, as to prove indisputably the strength and excellence of our religious principles? We should judge according to our Lord's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them†;" and therefore it will be proper to enquire, What do we bring forth? Do we produce the fruit of a good, or of a corrupt tree? Are we so impressed with the importance of eternal things, as evidently to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness?" Does it appear from our actions, that we "set the Lord always before us," and live as in his presence? Do we shew, by an uniform, consistent behaviour, that we are truly devoted to Him, and desirous to do his whole will? Do we, then, abandon

* Heb. vi. 18.

† Matt. vii. 20.

every wrong course, and pay a serious regard to every known duty, though tempted to transgress by general custom, worldly convenience, or carnal inclination? Such, at least, will be the case with real Christians. After making all proper allowances for human infirmities and natural depravity, still we must maintain, agreeably to St. John's declaration, that every man, who possesses the hope of the Gospel, "purifieth himself, even as God is pure*." If any thing short of this high attainment satisfy our consciences, if there be any iniquity, which we determine to hold fast, any kind or measure of holiness, to which we do not aspire, let us not presume on our professions: our religion is vain.

Though we are persuaded that our outward conduct will stand the test, we should examine likewise,

3. What are our motives and affections? This is a necessary scrutiny, in order to determine the nature of our obedience; since no action can be good, or acceptable before God, which springs not from a right principle. "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart †." With respect, therefore, to formalists and hypocrites, "that which is highly esteemed amongst men, is abomination in the sight of God ‡." The tremendous declaration should put us upon searching our inward parts, however painful the task may be. Do we not there discover treachery and corruption? But let us enquire, whether the grace of God has subdued the depravity of our fallen nature, and implanted holy

* 1 John iii. 3.

† 1 Sam. xvi. 7.

‡ Luke xvi. 15.

dispositions.

dispositions. What is the end, which we propose to ourselves, in forming our habits, or regulating our conduct? Under what influence do we practise those things, which we know to be required? With what views do we frequent the divine ordinances? Are we actuated by an unfeigned regard to God? Whence proceed our honesty, temperance, and frugality? Are we in these respects serving God, or consulting our own interest and reputation? What disposes us to works of benevolence? Are we constrained by the love of Christ, and not induced by pride or fashion? The Apostolical direction is, "Whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God*:" are we living by that exalted maxim? It is allowed, that eminent Christians experience a severe conflict from the corrupt desires of the flesh; but these they are enabled to resist. If carnal principles and tempers possess an habitual ascendancy, it will avail us nothing; that we possess a fair character; our hearts are unsound, and what we boast of as duties, are rather to be put down in the list of transgressions, for which we should implore forgiveness. May He, "who searcheth the reins," enable us to pass a right judgment!

It may be useful to pursue the enquiries, which St. Paul has suggested, and to examine,

1. "Whether we be in the faith." It is not enough, that we assent to the truth of revelation in general, or maintain the whole system of Christian doctrines. If such an external profession had been

* 1 Cor. x. 31.

insufficient, the Apostle's exhortation to the Corinthians would have been unnecessary. But, alas! nominal believers, as we perceive in numerous instances, may be destitute of the true, saving knowledge of the Redeemer: and therefore we should ever be reminded, that, "the form," without "the power of godliness" is unavailing. We must understand and feel the influence of our principles. It is of importance, that we "hold fast the form of sound words," and "contend earnestly for the faith:" but the Gospel requires more than mere speculative opinions. It commands us to possess a supreme regard to the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Saviour of sinners, and an entire dependence upon him for all spiritual blessings. To be "in the faith," is to live in the habitual exercise of such a disposition towards Christ, expecting pardon, peace, holiness, and heaven, as the gift of his love, and as the purchase of the blood of his cross.

This is the distinguishing temper of a Christian, and is of all others most indispensably requisite. Without such an attachment to the Son of God, we must renounce our claim to the precious promises of the new Covenant: for they are given only to them that believe. Without it our best morality is essentially defective; and, however valuable it may be in society, it cannot be acceptable to God. The proper foundation being wanting, the superstructure will fail. Do we, then, feel that our warmest affections are placed upon the Saviour; and are we continually looking to him for renewed communications
of

of his grace? Do all our hopes centre in him; and do we derive from him, by fresh applications, increase of light, strength, and comfort? Can we adopt St. Paul's declaration, and say, "The life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me *?"

We should search still further, and enquire

2. Whether "Jesus Christ is in us." This doubtless implies, that we possess his temper and disposition: and such will be the effect of a right knowledge of his character, and dependence on his grace. Those, who "behold his glory, are changed into the same image †." They "have put on Christ ‡;" and "as He is, so are they in this world §." For this reason, "He that faith he abideth in him, ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked ||." Let us seriously contemplate the perfect pattern of all righteousness, and "learn of him †." We have seen many bright examples among the ancient saints; but their glory vanishes before the superior lustre of this splendid Luminary, as the stars before the sun. Have we been so struck with the view of his excellence, as to be filled with admiration, and transformed into a holy, suitable resemblance?

He was "meek and lowly in heart;" "sought not his own glory," and maintained an uninterrupted fervour of devotion and secret communion with God. He was "not of the world," but "separate from sinners," and yet touched with the tenderest com-

* Gal. ii. 20. † 2 Cor. iii. 18. ‡ Gal. iii. 27. § 1 John iv. 17.

|| 1 John ii. 6.

† Matt. xi. 29.

passion for the miseries of mankind: he was merciful, patient, forgiving, and even prayed for his murderers. He yielded a perfect and cheerful obedience, and, through the ardour of his zeal, accounted it "his meat to do the will of Him that sent him, and to finish his work." Such was the Saviour: but is this the pattern, which we have proposed for our own imitation? If we have "received Christ Jesus the Lord," do we "walk in him*?" Is the same "mind in us, which was also in Christ Jesus†?" Are we so conformed to him, that those, who look at us, may behold his likeness? How many, alas! are totally opposite! The proud, the covetous, the lustful, the profane, the sensual, the contentious, and revengeful, will not pretend, surely, that they are among the followers of the Lamb. May they feel a deep conviction of their guilt, and confess with godly sorrow, that they are entire strangers to the religion of the Gospel!

But, when the Apostle says to believers, "Jesus Christ is in you," the words imply more than a mere imitation or resemblance of his character. We may fairly infer from them, that his people are joined to him by the agency of the Spirit, and favoured with his gracious residence in their hearts. No man, indeed, attains a likeness of disposition to the Saviour, but "by the renewing of the Holy Ghost." This divine influence is the more to be insisted on, because it is denied by many, who boast of the sufficiency of their own unassisted strength. The proud advo-

* Col. ii. 6.

† Phil. ii. 5.

cates for what is improperly termed a rational system of Theology, sneer at the notion of a spiritual union with Christ, as if it existed only in the wild imaginations of enthusiasts. Let us, however, without dreading reproach, receive the doctrine on the authority of the inspired writers, and pray with St. Paul, "that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith *." Let us rejoice in those kind assurances of our Redeemer; for they are big with consolation: "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me and I in him †." "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me ‡."

Believers, then, maintain a delightful intercourse with their exalted Lord. He guides and conducts them in the way wherein they should go: he strengthens them with might for the work assigned them; he purifies them from their corruptions, for his service and glory; and comforts them by decided tokens and clear manifestations of his love. Is this what we can testify from our own knowledge? Have we such an evidence of true religion in our souls? Our doubts and apprehensions should excite us to greater earnestness, in making and pursuing these enquiries: nor should we rest, till we perceive good reason to conclude, that "Christ is formed in us §." The precept, which requires us to examine ourselves, implies, that it is possible to arrive at such a conclusion,

* Eph. iii. 17.

† John vi. 56.

‡ Rev. iii. 20.

§ Gal. iv. 19.

on satisfactory grounds. "Know ye not your own selves?" said the Apostle. An ignorance of this kind, we observe, is spoken of as disgraceful to Christians. What will it avail us to be acquainted with the whole of "Scripture Characters?" The grand enquiry now is, and will be at the last, What is our own?

Is it thought, that the matter, here insisted on, is of trivial moment? It should be recollected, that "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his*." It is also solemnly declared, that "Jesus Christ is in you, EXCEPT YE BE REPROBATES†." The supposition is indeed alarming: yet let not the expression be perverted. None are rejected of God, as "reprobates," or doomed to eternal misery by an absolute decree, without regard to the state and disposition of their hearts. We must however maintain, agreeably to this description, that those, who are "alienated from the life of God," cannot be acceptable to him: after much trial, they are disapproved, like refuse metal, which is so full of dross as to be unfit for use; and therefore they are abandoned and finally cast away. Who shall presume to object to such a procedure? Is it not consistent with every principle of truth and equity? It is evident, that without a renovation of mind, through the influence of the Spirit, we must necessarily be excluded from the presence of God for ever. O let us pray, that He would "make us

* Rom. viii. 9.

† 2 Cor. xiii. 5.

meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light * !”

We attempt not to deny or conceal the tremendous sentence, “ that “ the wrath of God cometh upon the children of disobedience †.” But, “ knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” to embrace the offers of his mercy. We solemnly warn them of impending destruction, and entreat them with earnestness, not to trifle away their present opportunities. Through the whole of these practical reflections, we have endeavoured to keep in view the sad case of impenitent sinners, and engage their attention to the serious consideration of their danger. And if any such should cast their eyes upon these pages, we now again, in the conclusion, press them to examine themselves, before they be summoned to that strict and decisive scrutiny at the judgment seat of Christ. Then indeed will every character be clearly discovered: we shall “ discern between the righteous and the wicked ‡.” But then also will the state of every individual be determined beyond the possibility of a change. O give diligence, to flee from the wrath to come, and to obtain “ inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith, that is in Jesus Christ § !”

It is presumed, that many of our readers are among the faithful disciples of the Saviour; and the subjects, here treated, seem especially calculated to promote their edification and comfort. The writer will rejoice to be instrumental towards their spiritual advancement; and therefore, in a peculiar manner, he be-

* Col. i. 12. † Eph. v. 6. ‡ Mal. iii. 18. § Acts xxvi. 18.
speaks

speaks their attention. Possibly, you may be unnoticed and scorned in the midst of a sinful generation. But be encouraged to "hold on your way," in defiance of all difficulties and opposition. "The world knoweth you not, because it knew not Him *," whom you serve. In this view, you will not complain of contemptuous treatment. Consider, also, the examples of the most eminent saints. You are followers of them, who are now inheriting the promises. Their holy conduct will instruct you, their present happiness will enliven your hopes.

Soon shall you be admitted to a state of delightful intercourse with those exalted personages, whose characters you have been contemplating. You shall join with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with Moses and Elijah, with Peter, John, and Paul, in admiring and praising the God of your salvation. You shall come "to the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven †," and unite with Angels and Archangels, as well as with the illustrious company of Martyrs, Prophets, and Apostles, in ascribing "blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever ‡." Will not the prospect support and animate you, while you press forward with determined vigour? Let it be your great concern to recommend religion, both by your life and death. And may God grant, that he who writes and all who read these pages may be able to say with St. Paul, in the view of an approaching

* 1 John iii. 1. † Heb. xii. 23. ‡ Rev. v. 13.

dissolution,

dissolution, " I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith : Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day : and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing * !" Amen. . .

* 2 Tim. iv. 7, 8.

THE END.

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